



A BILLION-DOLLAR
BUSINESS NOVEL

Heartbreak
HELL-O

USA TODAY BEST SELLING AUTHOR
ALI PARKER

HEARTBREAK HELL-O

A BILLION-DOLLAR BUSINESS NOVEL #3



ALI PARKER

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DESCRIPTION



I hate how much I burn for my ex. My enemy.

She's the only woman I've ever loved, and she ripped my heart out.

Now she's back in my life as a professional rival. Good times all around.

We clash every time we're in the room together, but it only fuels my need to remind her who's in charge. Me.

Outside of the office I'm falling off the deep end. It's so easy with her.

She's everything I've ever wanted. In my life. My bed. My world.

We move from angry exes to hot hookups faster than anyone would expect, and the challenge is to not take advantage of her every time I see her.

Hard to do. Especially when my heart is involved.

One business trip later and I can't think about anything but her.

It might have started as Heartbreak Hell-O, but it's quickly moving to Say You Do.

Introduction



Well hey there! Thank you so much for grabbing one of my books. I sure hope you love it.

I'd hate to part ways once you're done though. How about we stay in touch? We have a great family of readers on my Insiders Newsletter Group that you just

can't miss out on.

We do exclusive giveaways, facebook parties, Christmas cards, event invites and sneak previews for this amazing group.

And as a HUGE thank you for joining,
you'll receive a free book on me!

[Join the fam Here!](#)

CHAPTER 1



JAX

I sighed as I checked my watch. It wouldn't be long until I would have to get out of this suite I shared with my twin brother, Max, and head down to the conference—even if I wished I could be anywhere else in the world right then.

I knew there were hundreds of people who would have done anything to be in my position right then. I should have been grateful, but it was hard to feel that way when I had pulled the short straw and had to come out as a representative for our brand this year. We'd visited a few times before, but I had never been the one sent out to show my face at this thing, and I was annoyed to be giving up my spare time to be in a sterile hotel for the weekend.

"Come on, game face on," Max told me as he adjusted his tie in the mirror situated in the living area of our suite. My twin brother was a lot more enthusiastic about this kind of stuff, and I had hoped it would rub off on me, but, judging by the way he was talking, it didn't seem like I had managed to convince him.

"It *is* on," I protested.

He cocked an eyebrow at me. "Oh, your game face just so happens to look like you would pay money to get out of doing this?"

I rolled my eyes skyward. "You know this isn't my thing," I replied. The conference was a chance for us to sniff out the best new collaborations for the next year, find out who looked like they were going to blow up, and step in as their marketing firm before anyone else did. But it meant a whole lot of schmoozing, a whole lot of putting up a façade, and I wasn't sure if I was up for it.

“I know, but you’re going to have to make it your thing for the next few hours at least,” he replied. “It’s not that bad. I did it last year. It can be kind of fun, if you know what you’re doing.”

“Sure,” I replied. I wasn’t sure if I believed him, but I would go along with it for now. Not like I had much of a choice. The guys were relying on me to make sure I found us some solid new clients for the upcoming year, and I would get some serious bonus points if I managed to score some contracts while I was here. Not that we were ever struggling to find people to work with us, of course, but getting our foot in the door of promising new brands was always a win.

The two of us headed downstairs, into the elevator, which opened up onto a large, glossy conference room that was already bustling with people. The hotel this exclusive gathering was being held at was the height of luxury, everything buffed and polished to perfection, but to me, it just seemed lifeless. I sighed, ran a hand through my hair, and scanned the room to see what—or who—jumped out at me.

Brands had booths set up around the sides of the room, and various other marketing execs were making their way around, inspecting each one, and offering cards and comments to those who caught their eye. Every brand here had been vetted before they’d gotten a spot in this place, and each and every one had been deigned to have shown enough growth and potential to earn the attention of high-level execs like us.

I might as well make the most of it while I was here. Rolling my shoulders back, I switched into game mode. I guessed it was the baseball player still in me, the guy who wanted to win no matter what. It helped in places like this, where the competition was so intense and demanding, but I knew I would get whatever I wanted and walk out with the signatures of any business I planned for us to work with.

Glancing around the room, a logo caught my attention—KICKS. The letters were written in a sleek font across the top of a line drawing of a sports shoe. Whoever had put together the logo knew what they were doing, and I could already see a woman enthusiastically pitching to them. Someone clearly thought they were worth the effort, at least.

I made my way over to them as the woman gesticulated at something. She was passionate, that was for sure, but I wasn’t about to sit back politely and let her take the lead. If I had learned anything in this business, it was that playing by the rules of social niceties rarely got you anywhere. Before she

could say another word, I drew a card from my pocket and leaned over her.

“Excuse me,” I cut in as I held out my card to the guy sitting in the middle of the booth. There were three of them in total, two men and a woman, and they all glanced over to look up at me as I demanded their attention.

The man took my card, and I could already feel the woman who had been pitching to them glowering up at me. I didn’t bother to look at her until I had made sure to offer a smile to everyone behind the desk, but I couldn’t help but catch her eye when I pulled back. As soon as our gazes locked, I felt something twist in my stomach.

It was *her*.

I didn’t recognize her from behind because she looked so different now. The once-long black hair she’d worn down to her waist in a tight braid had been chopped off to a blunt jaw-length bob, and her smart clothes and crisp presentation were a far cry from the often hectic girl I’d known back then. But those eyes? I would have known those eyes anywhere in the world. I stared at her, my heart twisting up into a ball inside my chest.

Morgan McClintock.

It was her. I was sure of it. Those sharp blue eyes cutting into mine and then widening when she realized who she was looking at. How long had it been since we had last seen one another? I didn’t even want to think. Years.

Years since she’d dumped me after we’d been together in college so she could focus on her priorities—her career, her valedictorian role, her extracurriculars, her classes. We’d dated for a couple of years, but she’d broken things off, telling me she didn’t want to waste my time when she was more interested in getting her feet under her professionally than she was in starting a family or settling down.

I could still remember how it had felt, the stab to my chest when she had ended things. How hurt I had been, how shocked—how I had tried to convince her I would support her through whatever she needed support through. We were both going into the same industry, and I saw us as some kind of power couple, taking on the world together. But she didn’t.

And now, she was here.

There was no doubt in my mind it was her. The way her lips curled up into a smile as soon as she saw me, that cocky little smirk I’d seen a hundred times before, it couldn’t have been anyone else. I should have known I’d run into her sooner or later, but the shock of it caught me off guard for a moment.

I quickly wiped any expression from my face, not wanting her to see that she had gotten to me, not wanting her to see the lingering emotions that rose up when I looked into her eyes.

“Well, if it isn’t Jaxson Holloway,” she greeted me, the polite smile on her lips clearly just a show she was putting on for the KICKS representatives. She didn’t want them to get a sense of our past. It would have shot down her professional credibility. But at the same time, I could tell she wanted to come out on top, wanted to show me how far she’d come.

“Good to see you too,” I replied, keeping my tone cool. No way was I going to give her an inch, not in front of these representatives. I knew how important it was to keep your head, even when you were faced with the last thing you expected, and she was about the very bottom of the list of shit I had expected to encounter that day.

“Now, if you don’t mind, I’d like to finish my presentation,” she continued, her tone clipped and sharp. She was telling me to back the hell off, but if she thought she was going to get rid of me that quickly, she had another trick coming.

I liked the look of this brand, and, if she had decided she liked it, I knew there had to be something to them. She’d always had a good eye for the up-and-comers, having been one herself, and her seal of approval was something I would take as a promise of their potential.

“You two know each other?” The woman piped up.

Morgan nodded, looking over at her and smiling. “Yes, we’ve run into each other before.”

I bristled. Run into each other? Was that how she described it to people? After everything we’d been through, everything we’d shared, she put it like that?

“I think we know each other a little better than that, Morgan,” I replied.

She fired a look at me, silently telling me to keep my mouth shut so I didn’t blow her chances. I was more worried about mine, of course, but I knew she wouldn’t hesitate to come for me if she thought I was a risk to her success. She had never been the kind of girl who had bothered to hold back when it came to saying what was on her mind, and I doubted that had changed at all.

“Maybe we can catch up later,” she replied, her jaw tense. “But I’d like to finish my pitch.”

I paused for a moment, lingering longer than I had to. I knew it had to be

driving her crazy to not be able to just tell me to get out of here and leave her the hell alone so she could do her job, but she had to keep up the game face in front of these potential clients.

“Maybe we can,” I replied, and I turned and made like I was leaving her to it. They had my card now. I had done all I needed to do, but if she thought I was going to just back off like that, she could think again.

Maybe this weekend wasn’t going to be so bad after all. If it meant I could win a contract right out from under her, snatch away something she wanted the same way she had done to me, it might be worth it. I took a step back and let her pick up where she had left off with KICKS, standing aside so she could get back into the flow of things before I jumped in once more.

She had a confidence to her, a collectedness, as though she knew exactly what she had to get out there and exactly how to do it. I eyed her as she worked, watching that crop of black hair swing back and forth as she spoke to them. My eyes trailed down her body—I couldn’t help it—and I wondered if she looked just as good as I remembered underneath all those clothes. I could still recall the curves of her body beneath my hands, the way she felt, the way she moved...

I pushed those thoughts to the back of my mind. Right now, right here, in this conference, there was only one thing that mattered.

And it was winning.

CHAPTER 2



MORGAN

“So, as you can see, we’ve got a proven track record with other sportswear brands,” I continued, trying not to let the shock of running into Jax throw me off.

At least he had left me alone now. I didn’t want to have to handle his shit. I was sure he had a point to prove now that he had run into me here, but I wasn’t going to let him prove it on the clients I was sure I already had in the bag.

“As do we,” he cut in before I could get another word out. I spun around to face him, anger flaring in my system. What the hell did he think he was doing? I was in the middle of my pitch, and he knew that. It was just common decency to wait until one person had finished before you launched into your own approach, even if he was acting like he didn’t have a clue of that fact.

“Actually, we recently worked with the sneakers brand Fully Trained last year,” he continued, his voice smooth and confident.

I gritted my teeth, clenching my hands by my sides. He knew I would have to tell him off if I wanted him to stop, and it would make me look petty and demanding in front of these people I wanted to work with.

He took out his phone and pulled up pictures of the advertising campaign his company had put together for the relevant brand. I wanted to smack that damn phone out of his hand and toss it across the room, tell him to leave and let me finish what I had started, but this business was brutal, and the best I could do was stand there and listen politely while I waited him out.

His pitch was good, too. He knew just what to say. It was short, sharp, and to the point, and he closed out with a thankful nod for their time. I could see from the way they were looking at one another they were impressed, and

my stomach sank when I realized I was going to lose them if I didn't pull something out of the bag soon.

I had to kill him with kindness. Couldn't let them see that he had gotten to me. If there was one thing I couldn't show in a place like this, it was a hint of vulnerability. I had to keep my shit together and make sure I didn't let them see how badly I had been thrown off by this.

"Thank you for your time," I told them. "I'm looking forward to chatting with you more about this soon. I know we'd be perfectly suited to handle an account of your size, and we can deliver the support you're looking for in your releases over the next year."

I shook their hands, keeping the smile on my face up until the moment I turned away. Then, I let it drop as I locked eyes with him once more. I knew it wasn't going to help my case, but I couldn't stop myself. I stormed over to him.

"What in the name of holy hell do you think you're doing?" I demanded, planting my hands on my hips and glaring up at him.

"What do you mean?" he asked, feigning ignorance. "I'm just taking advantage of my time here, like everyone else."

"You're acting like a child," I replied. "This is meant to be a professional setting. Not some playground where you get to try and settle old scores."

"And what scores might those be?" he replied, cocking an eyebrow as though he was daring me to come out and say it. My stomach tensed. He knew just what I was talking about, but he wasn't going to get me to say it. Not here, not in the middle of this conference, not when I knew I had better things to be focusing on right then.

"Why don't you go keep yourself busy somewhere else?" I asked him. "Flirt with one of the waitresses or something. You were always good at that, weren't you?"

He looked amused and shrugged.

"Good luck with the account," he replied, nodding to the booth he had just interrupted me at.

I did my best not to let him get under my skin. I knew it was what he wanted, to see me stressed so he had a better chance of winning. The pitch was just one part of a conference like this. The rest of it came down to how much people liked you and how good of an impression you could make on them. If I freaked out or let them see him getting to me, they would give the account to him in a heartbeat.

He paused for a moment before he left, and his eyes lingered on mine. I could feel a heat rising inside me, some leftover attraction from when we had been dating. Nothing more than that. I pushed it down.

“You look good, by the way,” he remarked. And then, finally, he turned and walked away from me, leaving me seething in the middle of the bustling conference room. I wished I had something clever to shoot back at him, but he just left me there with my mouth open, stuck without a smart response.

Fuck! I tried to clear my head, but he had managed to get under my skin. He was the last person I had wanted to run into here, and having to deal with the shock of seeing him was more than I could take.

I got through the rest of the conference, doing my best to avoid him. I didn’t want to wind up fighting for another account with him, though I was sure he had just shown interest in KICKS because I had been there. This was his way of getting revenge, his way of making sure I didn’t win this round. Was he still that hurt over what had happened between us? It had been for the best.

The more time I spent with him going around my head, the less time I had to make the most of my first time at this conference.

Back in my hotel room, I dialed up Susan, my boss, and flopped back on the bed, letting out a long sigh. I would fill her in on everything that had happened, and then I would run myself a bath and call Haley to vent about the way Jax had acted with me.

“Morgan, good to hear from you.” She greeted me as soon as she answered the phone in her usual smooth tones. There was a reason she was running this company and I was just working for her. She knew exactly how to handle herself, exactly how to talk. Every person she came across, she spoke to them as though they were a potential client, something I had tried to pick up from her too.

“How’s the conference going?” she asked.

“Well, I think. I pitched to a few brands—”

“What about KICKS?” she asked. “I heard a lot of buzz about them. Were you able to speak to them?”

“Yes, I was,” I replied, proud I had managed to spot the same potential in them that she had. “We’re in with a good chance of getting that account, I’m sure of it.”

“I want you to make sure it’s more than just a good chance,” she replied. “You make sure you land it, okay? I want them on our roster. They’re

impressive, and they're going to be even bigger. Especially with our help."

"I will," I replied, and I meant it. She didn't know who my competition was, of course, but I was going to do everything I could to make sure he didn't run away with this damn thing. If he thought he could just breeze in and steal it right out from under me, he had a whole other think coming. A *whole* other think.

"Anyone else you think they're interested in?" she asked.

"There was one other brand, but I don't think they're going to be able to offer the same level of personalization as us," I replied. "I can beat them, I'm sure of it."

"Make sure you do," Susan replied, and it was as much of a warning as it was a piece of encouragement. When it came to my boss, she expected the very best, and I was determined to give it to her.

"Give me a call tomorrow with an update, alright?" she told me. "I have to get back to work."

"Talk soon," I replied, but she had hung up the phone before I could get the words out. I rose to my feet and started running a bath, using a generous amount of the bubble bath that came with the room to turn this place into as close to a spa as I could muster. I needed the atmosphere, needed the peaceful vibes, especially knowing he was in the same building as me.

I dialed up Haley's number and propped the phone up at the edge of the bath, switching it on to speaker so I could hear her as I slipped beneath the water.

"Hey, babe!" she answered, her bright tones putting a smile on my face. She was my best friend. The two of us had been there for each other through everything these last few years, and if anyone was going to keep me sane in the face of what had just happened, it would be her.

"How's your conference going? You making the most of that fancy hotel?" she asked.

"Sure am," I replied. "The conference is, uh, it's kind of crazy, actually. I ran into Jax today."

"Jax?" she replied, and I could tell she was trying to remember if I'd talked to her about him. Finally, it clicked. "Oh, shit, your college boyfriend, right?"

"Yeah, that's him," I replied grimly, rolling my eyes skyward. "He's here too. And he tried to take an account right out from underneath me. Can you believe it?"

“Jesus, what an asshole,” she muttered. “You think he’s trying to get back at you for what happened?”

“He can’t be, can he?” I replied, furrowing my brow and shaking my head. “I mean, it was years ago. He wouldn’t still be holding a grudge after all this time.”

“You know how some guys can be,” she pointed out, a hint of bitterness in her voice. If there was a single person more cynical about the world of romance than me, it was Haley, and that was an impressive feat, given my own attitude on the subject.

“Yeah, I guess,” I agreed. “I just—shit, I can’t wait for this to be over now. I don’t want to have to spend any more time with him than I have to. And I get the feeling he’s not going to make it easy for me to do what I need to do while I’m here, you know?”

“Tell him to go fuck himself if he starts acting up,” she replied.

I laughed. “I’m not sure that would make such a good impression on the people I’m going to be working with.”

“Who cares? Sometimes you’ve got to put a guy in his place,” she replied.

I bit my lip. There was something else on my mind too, though I wasn’t sure if I wanted to say it out loud. The way he had looked at me, the comment he had made about how good I looked? They were sticking in my mind, and I hated how much it seemed to have hooked into my brain.

“And he told me I looked good,” I blurted out. “That’s crazy, right? Totally inappropriate.”

“Ugh, totally,” she replied. “He’s just trying to get you off your game. Don’t let him win.”

“Yeah, he was probably just trying to throw me off,” I replied. He didn’t mean it, right? There was no way he was still attracted to me after all this time, especially after the way things had ended before. He hadn’t exactly taken the end of our relationship well, and I doubted he was in any rush to make me feel good about myself now that we seemed to have stumbled across one another again.

Besides, I looked totally different now, totally removed from the girl he had been into before. He couldn’t look at me and see any of that, not anymore, not after all this time.

Could he?

I slipped a little further under the water and turned the conversation to

what had been happening with Haley. Maybe it would be better to get my mind off of this and talk about something else. Because if I spent too long thinking about him, he was going to get up inside my head, and that was the last thing I needed for the rest of this conference.

CHAPTER 3



JAX

As I headed to the office on Monday morning, there was only one thing on my mind—her.

She looked so damn good at the conference. I had seen her around a few times, and each and every one, I swear she had been hotter than the last. Those eyes, those curves, those *legs*? She had been wearing a pair of heels and stockings on the last day, and I swear, it felt downright impossible to keep my mind where it needed to be. I found my gaze sneaking over to her, stealing glances every chance I got and checking to see if she was paying any notice to me.

I was surprised she wasn't getting attention from every guy at the conference, to be honest. The way she looked, the way she moved, the air of confidence she carried with her, I knew I couldn't have been the only one to notice it. Even when we had been in college, she'd had something of that energy to her, her sureness in herself. I knew there had been plenty of guys back then who would have done anything for a chance at a date with her, and I could still recall how lucky I felt that she had chosen me.

But I was leaving that in the past. Right where she belonged. The two of us had split years ago, and she was well and truly part of my old life, not my new one. The way she had been avoiding me, it was clear she wanted to keep it that way, too—clear she wanted nothing more than to act like the two of us had never met in the first place. Fine. If that was what she wanted, she could have it.

Besides, I had bigger things to focus on—namely, landing the KICKS account. I had been looking into them after I'd given them my pitch, and I was sure they would be a great fit for us. Growing fast, they had already

gotten a lot of organic buzz around them. With a little help, a little boost, they could be a major brand. We just needed to see that through.

As soon as I got to my office, I dialed up the number I'd managed to get my hands on for the brand, planning to give them another pitch as soon as I had the chance. Plenty of other brands would be resting and recalibrating after the conference over the weekend, but that would just give us time to get a leg up on those who were a little lazy. If I could be the first one through the door, so to speak, make sure they put me at the top of their list, I would be in with a damn good chance of making this happen for us.

"Hi, there," I greeted the guy who picked up the phone, putting on my most charming voice. "Is this Raymond Deaker?"

"That's me," he replied. He sounded a little tired, and I guessed he must have had stacks of people reaching out to him, pitching to him, once they had seen how well his brand was doing.

"This is Jaxson Holloway," I explained to him. "We met at the conference on Saturday. How are you doing?"

I let him fill me in as I played at being interested, making sure to come across like I really cared. I wanted him to feel like he'd really had a chance to get to know me. It would give me a better shot at securing this account. If I proved they would get the personal touch with us, they would sign up in an instant. Smaller brands like this one, those on the brink of blowing up, looked for stuff like that, people they could put their faith into.

"If you're free today, I'd love to book a meeting so we can talk about a future collaboration," I told him once he was finished.

He hesitated before he answered. "I'd love to meet with you, but we actually have another representative coming in for a meeting later today. We're all booked up."

I silently cursed to myself. Someone had managed to get there before me. Well, I wasn't going to let it throw me off.

"I could come into the meeting too," I offered. "So you wouldn't have to go over it more than once. How does that sound?"

I was sure whoever had managed to score the meeting would be fuming when they found out I was going to be there, but I didn't give a damn. You had to be ruthless in this line of work. You couldn't let anything like decency or sportsmanship get in the way of what needed to be done.

"Sure, that sounds good," he replied.

As we spoke, Max appeared at the door and lifted his hand to attract my

attention. I waved him away, silently gesturing for him to get out until I had finished up the call. I could tell he was irritated, but he did as he was told, knowing better than to get in my way when it came to work.

On the tip of my tongue was a question about who the other company was. It couldn't be Morgan's, could it? No way. No way she would have managed to get in before me. It would have been totally out of order to ask, and I wasn't sure it mattered anyway. I was going to beat them to the punch, and that was all that really mattered.

"Send over the when and where, and I'll be there," I told him, and he agreed at once. I felt a punch of triumph when I hung up the phone. I didn't know who I was going to be up against, but I knew they didn't stand a chance against me, not really.

"Max?" I called out into the hall.

My brother stuck his head around the door and raised his eyebrows. "Oh, now you deign to speak to me?"

"I was on a call," I told him, rolling my eyes and grinning. "You wouldn't want me to blow this just to talk to you, right?"

"Your own brother?" he replied, acting offended, even though I knew he wasn't. When it came to work, he got that I was committed, and there was nothing to pull me away from it.

"Yeah, my own brother," I replied, laughing.

"Is this for one of the brands you were talking to at the conference?"

"Yeah, KICKS," I replied. "I think they'd be a major win for us, if we can land them. And we will."

"You say that like it's a done thing already," he remarked.

"It already is, as far as I'm concerned," I replied. "They've got a meeting with some other group this afternoon, but I'm dropping in on it."

"Do they know that yet? The other group, I mean?"

"Nope."

"Damn, that's cold." He laughed. "You're ruthless, Jax."

"You've got to be when it comes to this job, you know that," I replied, shrugging. "I should get everything together before the meeting. I want to be prepared."

Aside from needing to get ready, I didn't want to speak to my brother right then because I was sure he had something to say about the fact that my ex had been at that conference. I wasn't sure if he had seen her, and I sure as hell hadn't brought her up myself, but surely, he must have noticed there was

something up with me. He'd been there for me through the shitstorm that had followed when she had dumped me, and I didn't want him doubting me or my commitment to the job now that she happened to have wandered back into my life.

Besides, I wasn't going to see her again. No way. It had been a one-time thing, no repeat performances, and I was sure she was as glad for that as I was. I didn't want to see her. And judging by the way I had cut in on her space before, I was a bad-luck charm for her, one she didn't want to see any more of than she had to.

"Good luck," Max remarked as I turned back to my laptop and started to run through the files I wanted to bring along with me.

I had said I was just sitting in on the meeting, but in truth, I was intending to make the most of it and show off a few of our old campaigns to get them to see how well we would work together, given the chance. It might have been unfair to the people who were trying to score this client, but hey, I had long ago learned that fair didn't mean jack shit in this business.

"I don't need it, but thanks," I replied.

He laughed. "Damn, you're cocky today," he remarked. "Something got into you?"

"I just know we're going to land this deal, that's all," I replied. "I'm confident, not cocky."

"Not sure I believe that, but okay," he replied with a grin. "I'll leave you to it. Let me know if you need anything, okay?"

"Will do," I called to him as he headed out the door. I was going to beat the other group down there. If I could get in there first, it would make it easier for me to make a better impression. They would be coming in late, or at least feeling like it, and that would put them on the back foot. I had learned all these little games and plays over the years to make sure I got where I needed to go, got what I needed from these situations. It might not have been the cleanest way to do it, but it got the job done, and I knew better than to go overthinking at a time like this.

Even if I was wondering about Morgan right then. Wondering if she might be there, if she was the other person who had managed to get a foot in the door so soon after the conference. When I had known her, she had always been sharp, always been focused, and it wouldn't have shocked me to find out she was the one smart enough to make an early move like this.

I would be able to handle it either way. I knew I had managed to get

under her skin with our first encounter at the conference, and if she saw me again, I would have the upper hand. I just needed to make sure I could maintain it—and keep myself from getting too distracted by the sight of those long, luscious legs underneath her skirt this time.

CHAPTER 4



MORGAN

I checked over the documents I had prepared to take down to the meeting in just an hour's time, and felt a little twinge of nervousness in my chest. I pushed it right back down again. No way was I going to let that get under my skin. I was going to pull off this pitch, and I was going to make sure KICKS felt like they didn't have any choice but to go with us.

I had called up first thing on Monday morning and set up a meeting with them that afternoon. I was sure there would be plenty of companies circling around them right now, trying to close the gaps and make it so they could get them on board, but I had the advantage of getting in there first. They would remember me if I was the first one through the door, and I intended to make the most of the advantage as I could.

Susan strolled past my desk, glancing over at the papers scattered across it. "Everything alright?" she asked, cocking an eyebrow.

I nodded. "It's all great," I assured her. "I'm getting ready for a meeting with KICKS. Just want to make sure I have everything in order when I get down there."

"A meeting already, huh?"

I nodded. "I didn't want to waste any time."

"Glad to hear it." She grinned. "Is there anything you need from me? You want to run the pitch past me before you go out?"

"I'd love to, but I have to be there in an hour," I replied, glancing at my watch. "I should be getting ready to go right about now."

"No problem," she replied, nodding. "You let me know how it goes when you get back, okay?"

"Will do," I replied, and I watched as she headed back to her office. I

didn't want to let her down, and the only way I was going to be able to make sure of that was if I nailed this meeting.

Just as I was about to fill my bag and get out of there, my phone buzzed, and I grabbed it at once.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Morgan, it's Ronald, from KICKS," he greeted me. "Just wanted to let you know about a slight change to the plan for the meeting today."

I sank back down into my seat, feeling a wave of tension wash through me. Shit. What was it he wanted? What had happened? Maybe someone else had managed to sell a plan to him he found more attractive than the one I was putting forward.

"Okay, no problem," I replied, swallowing down my nerves. "What's changed?"

"We've got another company's rep coming to sit in on the meeting with you," he explained. "So we don't have to repeat ourselves when we'll be telling you the same thing. Is that okay?"

I frowned. No, it wasn't okay, but I had to find a way to say that to him without making it sound like I was angry.

"I was hoping I'd have a chance to talk to you one-on-one," I replied carefully, keeping my tone as steady as I could. He must have been able to sense how irritated I was, though, because he sighed down the line.

"Yes, well, as you know, we're very busy," he told me. "And we don't have time to waste going over the same things twice with different companies. So, it's either this meeting with the other rep, or none at all. What would you prefer?"

I fell silent. I didn't know what to say to him. No, I knew what I wanted to say to him. I wanted to tell him that whoever had shoved their way into the meeting I had set up could go fuck themselves and that I deserved to have this time with him one-on-one to talk about my plans. That anyone who thought they could do a better job than me was lying to themselves, and they wouldn't have stood a chance against me when it came down to it. He shouldn't even bother having them around right now because he would choose me anyway.

But instead, I managed to sugar my tone and agreed instead. I was confident in my abilities, and if I had to deliver them in the room with someone else there, so be it.

"That's fine," I replied. "Same time and place, is that correct?"

“Yes, we’ll see you soon,” he replied, and he hung up the phone. I drummed my fingers on the table with irritation as I sat there at the desk, trying to recalibrate my approach to all of this. I didn’t like it, sure, but I couldn’t pull out now. I would just be handing the win to whoever had shoved their way into my spot, and I had never been in the business of letting other people take a victory where I knew I deserved it.

I wasn’t sure who it was, but they weren’t going to use these sneaky underhanded ways to beat me. I gathered my stuff, packed up, and headed out of the office once more.

I had been working for Susan for a couple of years now, after she had taken one look at my application and sensed the fire and passion I had for this industry. I’d worked my ass off, taking on internships and any work I could get in college, so I could get my head above everyone else around me. While everyone else around me was partying, having a good time, I was thinking about what came next and how important it was for me to get as much experience as I could under my belt to keep everything ticking over once I had graduated.

It hadn’t taken me long to find a decent job with a small advertising firm, and now, I was doing everything I could to prove Susan had made the right choice when she had decided she wanted to work with me. I had managed to score a couple of smaller brand deals over the last couple of years, but this had been my first time going out to the major conference as our representative, and I was determined to show her I could be trusted to do it again.

KICKS would be a major win for me, and I had tried to approach it in the smartest way I possibly could, putting together a solid pitch so they would have a good idea of where we would take them if they worked with us. We were a smaller company, so what we had to offer was a more bespoke experience—a chance to put them front and center and make sure they knew just how seriously we took all of this. There were bigger brands circling them, no doubt, but they wouldn’t be able to give them what we could, and it was that I was planning to use as the basis for my pitch.

I arrived outside their office about twenty minutes before the meeting. If there was one thing I had learned from this industry, it was that getting there before everyone else was the best way to go about it. A trick Jax had taught me, actually, when we had been together, not that I liked to credit him for it if I could avoid it.

Either way, I knew I would have beaten my competitors here, and it was the only thing I cared about. The office was pretty impressive for a company as small as this one, although inside it looked like they had just moved in. The walls were still mostly sparse, apart from a handful of branded images clearly taken from their social media. We would soon switch that up once we were working with them. This place would soon be covered in photo ops and awards once we had managed to get them out there.

I approached the desk, where a secretary looked up at me. She had a slightly nervous expression on her face, and I wondered if it was her first day working here. The place didn't look as though it had been open long, and I was sure the staff here hadn't exactly been around for any length of time either.

"I'm here to meet with the founders," I told her. "I have a meeting with them this afternoon. I'm Morgan?"

"Yes, Morgan, right," she replied, and she squinted down at the laptop screen in front of her. "They're just finishing up with their last meeting right now. You can go and wait at the room they've designated for this one if you like?"

"That would be great."

"Okay, it's up the stairs, to the left, you can't miss it. There's a bench outside for you to wait on," she told me.

I smiled, knowing I had to make a good impression on everyone here. The more they all liked me, the easier it was going to be to convince them I was the right choice to work with them. It started here, with the receptionist, even though plenty of people would have just breezed by her without a second thought.

"Thanks for your help," I replied, and I made my way up the stairs to find the spot she had directed me to.

I wasn't sure if the other person had arrived too. I should have asked her, made sure I was ready for it if I ran into them. But I wasn't about to let them get to me, either way. They might have thought I would buckle and let them have this meeting to themselves, but they had another damn thing coming if they thought I would just roll over. This industry was cut-throat, and everyone knew it. I hadn't made it as far as I had by playing nice and letting people take whatever they wanted from me, had I?

It was probably someone I had seen at the conference. Maybe someone who had looked at me, seen I was new, and wondered if they could exploit it.

I clenched my hands by my sides as I made my way up the stairs. I hated it when people underestimated me, and it happened a lot. As a woman in this business, people saw me, saw my age, saw my gender, and they thought I would just be a pushover, an easy way for them to get what they wanted.

But whoever it was, whoever had tried it, they were going to come up against a brick fucking wall right now. I paused just before I turned the corner at the top of the stairs, smoothing down my shirt, tugging down my skirt slightly, making sure they couldn't see the tattoo peeping out underneath it on my thigh—an impulsive decision, and one I had to make sure I covered whenever I was at work. Another thing people would judge me for, if I wasn't careful.

Finally, I reached the top of the stairs. And, sure enough, the person who had invaded the meeting I'd set up was sitting right there on the bench in front of me.

Holy shit.

No fucking way.

There was no way in hell it could be him. Just no way. But as he stared down at his phone and I watched him from across the room, I knew it couldn't have been anyone else.

It was Jax. Jax fucking Holloway, the man I couldn't seem to shake for the life of me. I thought I'd seen the last of him at the conference, but now, here he was, sitting right in front of me, eyes pinned to his phone. He hadn't even noticed I was here. I was frozen at the top of the stairs, the sheer shock enough to keep me stuck to the spot.

I narrowed my eyes and rolled my shoulders back. Oh, so this was how it was, huh? He thought he could steal this contract out from under me? I wasn't sure if this was payback for the way I had dumped him before, or something else entirely, but I didn't give a shit. Whatever his reasons for being here, if it had anything to do with me at all, I would handle him.

Just like I handled everything.

CHAPTER 5



JAX

I heard her footsteps coming up the stairs as I was scanning over some emails, and I recognized them at once.

I wished I didn't, wished I could have forgotten them after all these years. But I knew it was her before I even looked up. When I glanced over to see her standing at the top of the stairs, a look of sheer shock on her face, I knew I was the last person she had been expecting to see here.

She made her way over to me, keeping her face pointedly neutral, and took her seat next to me. No doubt she was fuming I had managed to force my way into her precious meeting with the brand. I leaned back, eyeing her with amusement. I was almost tempted to tell her she looked good again, but I didn't. It wouldn't have been fair. Right now, we were just going to use our skills professionally to shut each other down.

"Afternoon," I greeted her, and she glanced over at me.

"Good afternoon," she replied, her voice nearly robotic as she tried to keep all emotion out of it. I could tell she was struggling not to blow up at me, but she managed to keep her tone even, not giving anything away.

I smiled. "You here for the meeting too?"

"No, I just thought it would be fun to sit here all day with nothing better to do," she replied sarcastically.

"Going to have to watch that attitude," I remarked with a smirk. "Don't want to let them hear you talking down to your competition, do you?"

"You're not my competition," she replied bluntly, narrowing her eyes at me. "I was the one who got this meeting, not you. You're lucky to be here."

"And yet, here I am," I replied, grinning widely. I was prodding and poking her, trying to get her off her game. The company was relying on me to

get this deal, and I had to use all the tools at my disposal to ensure it happened.

“Yeah, not for long,” she replied. “Once they see what kind of person you are, they’re not going to want to work with you.”

“And what kind of person is that?” I asked her, pushing her. She fired an angry look over at me.

“The same arrogant, cocky—”

Before she could get another word out, the door opened, and Ronald stood there to wave us in. She plastered a smile over her fury and extended her hand to him at once.

“Ronald, great to see you again,” she greeted him smoothly as I put my phone away and rose to my feet. Shit. I didn’t want her to get in before me, but she had jumped at the chance to get on his good side.

We were both ushered in to find the three of them, Nadia, William, and Ronald, waiting for us on the other side of the table. We took our seats, and she glanced over at me. I could still feel the anger coming off her in waves, her fury and distaste about the fact I was even here obvious. I hoped it would be enough to get her to drop the act of playing nice and let them see the real her behind it all, the ruthless asshole who’d treated me the way she had in college.

“Thank you both for coming in today,” Nadia began. “We’re really flattered by your interest in this company, and we’d like to offer you both a small trial to see who’d be the best fit for the position.”

“Sounds wonderful,” she replied.

Nadia continued. They wanted us to create a small pitch campaign for a new shoe they were planning to put out into the market at the end of the year. It would be paid, of course, but the real money, as we all knew, was in landing the contract.

I knew my partners at the business would want to know how much we were going to be getting for our work—I knew not to do anything for free—but before I could ask, Morgan jumped in with the same question.

“Obviously, I understand this won’t be paid at full rates due to the trial nature of the project,” Morgan remarked. “But how much are you allocating to this?”

“Of course, we would never expect you to undervalue your time,” Nadia replied, furrowing her brow seriously. “We’ll negotiate an appropriate budget with both of you separately, and we can take it from there.”

“Perfect,” I replied, cutting in, just doing my best to make sure they hadn’t forgotten I was in the damn room. She was getting ahead of me with everything, and I couldn’t let her keep winning. At this rate, they were going to walk out of here only remembering her, and I couldn’t allow that to happen.

“So, we’d like to give you access to the factory so you can take a look at the work we’re doing down there, and you have our full permission to take pictures and chat to some of our employees down there to come up with something you think would serve as the best advert for the new release,” she explained. “Whoever we choose, this particular campaign will be the first one you create for us when we begin working together officially.”

I nodded, leaning back in my seat. This was a good deal. A chance for me to prove I was the right person for the job because I had the skills and resources I needed to make this work. I doubted she would have access to everything I did, let alone the skills of the other guys I worked with. I had it in the bag. I was sure of it.

They went over a few more details, sharing the last few things we’d need to know before we jumped into it, and I took it all in. But out of the corner of my eye, I kept looking over at her, too, wondering what was going through her mind and what she was planning. I was sure she had already started to put together the pieces of how she was going to approach the trial they had laid out for us, and I wished I could have picked her brains and found out a little more.

Soon enough, the meeting was done with, and I shook hands with all of them and made my way out. There was a whole lot for me to think about, a lot for me to consider in the way I was going to approach this, but if I was being honest, I just wanted to see if I could get under her skin a little more. Anything I could do to get her off her fighting form would benefit me in the long run.

We both made our way to the stairs together, and she tried to get out a little ahead of me, but I caught up with her at once. She paused to check something in her bag, and I fell into pace with her.

“How are you going to handle the trial?” I asked her.

She looked up at me incredulously and snorted with derision. “You really think I’m going to go telling you that? Come on. I’m not that stupid.”

“We could talk about it, if you want,” I offered. “You could pick my brain. Get some advice from an expert.”

Her cheeks flushed slightly, a sure sign she was annoyed. “I’ll be fine, thanks,” she replied, her teeth gritted as she continued to head down the stairs.

I strolled alongside her. The best thing about having dated her in the past was knowing what bothered her, knowing what pissed her off. I could use it to my advantage, and I planned to use it in every way I could to win this competition we had just been thrown into together.

“Well, you know where to find me if you change your mind,” I replied, and she kept her eyes fixed forward. As soon as we reached another doorway, she made her way out of it.

“That’s not the way to the exit,” I called after her.

She stopped, looked around, and then shrugged. “This is where I wanted to go,” she told me sharply.

I knew she was lying, but hey, if she wanted to spend another ten minutes wandering around this place for the sake of not having to be alone with me any longer, that was on her, right?

She stormed off, slamming the door behind her, and I felt a grin spread over my face. I didn’t know how she was going to go about taking on this trial, but I did know I was going to do everything I could to make sure she didn’t stand a chance against me.

No matter what happened from this point forward, I knew I was up against a worthy opponent. She was going to make this tough for me, but I would still pull it off in the end—and finally get my payback for the way she had treated me when the two of us had been in college.

Petty? Probably. But sometimes, you had to embrace that pettiness and let it drive you where you needed to go. And it was going to take me right to the top.

Just like it always had.

CHAPTER 6



MORGAN

As soon as the door was shut behind me, I dropped my head to my chest and tried to pull myself together. I needed to stop letting him get under my skin the way he did. I had to handle myself when I was around him, make sure it wasn't so obvious he had succeeded in getting to me.

I couldn't fucking believe he was the one I was up against for this contract. It felt insane, as though it shouldn't have even been allowed. *You should never have to deal with an ex when it came to work, should you? There should be some kind of law against it.*

I listened for his footsteps, making sure they had retreated down the rest of the stairs before I headed on my way out again. I really shouldn't have been so freaked out about spending any amount of time with him, but I hated being near him, hated the way he talked to me, the way he looked at me. As though he knew he had me right where he wanted me, and nothing was going to let me forget it.

The meeting had gone well, at least. I thought so anyway. I hoped they hadn't been able to pick up on any of the tension between us. The last thing I needed was for someone to catch on to the fact there was history there. I had done everything I could to make sure it didn't show in my face, but sometimes, it was more about the vibe in the air than it was about what anyone was doing, and I felt like it must have been impossible for them not to notice the strange mix of anger and *something else* in the air between us.

I couldn't help but wonder if this was deliberate on his part. Was this his way of getting back at me for what had happened between us when we had been in college? Had he known I was the one he was going to be up against in that meeting? I wouldn't have put it past him. If there was anyone I knew

who might have been willing to do something so crazy, it was him.

But I supposed it was one of the reasons he was part of a major brand and I was working for a much smaller one. He would throw himself at any chance that came along to prove himself, use his spite to crawl a little higher up the ladder in the process. I wished I had the nerve to call him out on it, tell him I could see just what he was doing and that I didn't appreciate it one bit.

The best I could do was prove him wrong, show him he didn't just get to walk into my meetings and take my contracts from me. I had no idea what was going to happen next, but I would make sure we came out on top. It would give me great satisfaction to knock him off his perch, get that smile off his face, and make him pay for the way he had treated me.

I needed to blow off some steam before I got back to the office, and I called up Haley so I could vent to her about everything that had happened. She would always give it to me straight, and I knew she would see this for the total bullshit it was and get behind me in taking him down.

"No way!" she gasped when she found out who the other person at the meeting had been. "The college guy again?"

"Yeah, it was him." I sighed. "I couldn't freaking believe it."

"You think he's doing it on purpose?" she wondered aloud. "You know, to get to you or something?"

"I think he might be," I admitted. "Is that too paranoid?"

"No way," she replied. "Sounds like he's crazy. You should totally call him out on it."

"I don't think that's a good idea." I sighed. "I have to think about my reputation. I can't let anyone think I'm the insane one for coming after him."

"Ugh, I hate that you have to be so careful," she whined. "You should be able to call out bullshit when you see it, right?"

"I mean, I agree, but I think it'd be more impactful if I just beat him getting this contract," I admitted.

"Yeah, you totally can," she replied. "You're going to kick his ass, I know it."

I paused for a moment, grabbing a seat on the street as the people on their lunch break rushed past me. I wasn't sure what it was, but something was bothering me. Something about being close to him, feeling his eyes on me again, it made me feel confused.

"Something bugging you?" Haley asked, instantly sensing there was something up.

I bit my lip. “I don’t know,” I admitted. “It’s strange being so close to him after all this time, you know?”

“You don’t still have feelings for him, do you?” she exclaimed.

I shook my head, even though I knew she couldn’t see me. “No, no, it’s nothing like that,” I assured her. “It’s just... bringing up old memories, I guess?”

“Yeah, I get that,” she agreed. “But you’ve both moved on by now, right?”

“I hope so,” I replied. It was never like he was short of women who always seemed to be interested in him, and he had always reveled in the attention. I had no doubt that his rich lifestyle and charm had served him pretty well in finding someone new.

I was still single, of course, but it was a choice I had made to stay that way, nothing to do with not being able to find anyone. I hadn’t been out on the dating scene for so long, as it was, I didn’t know if people would have looked twice in my direction. I couldn’t help but feel a little twist of jealousy when I thought about how easy it probably was for him to find women when so many guys would have been put off by the fact I was focused on my career and took it seriously.

“He’s probably married by now anyway,” she added. “Guy like that, they always have women following them around, right? Gold-diggers, probably.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” I replied. I hoped she was right. I hadn’t noticed a ring on his finger, but then, I had been so distracted by the attitude he was giving me most of the time, it wasn’t as though I was paying attention to much else that was going on.

“Yeah, exactly,” she replied. “You shouldn’t let him get to you. Whatever happened between the two of you in the past, it’s over now, right?”

“Well and truly,” I agreed.

I wanted to believe my own statement. I really did. And maybe it was just the tension between us, just the tension I was mistaking for something else, but I wasn’t sure. He was still hot. There was no doubt about it. Even if nothing had happened between us before, it wasn’t as though I didn’t notice it—didn’t notice the strength in his body, the smell of his aftershave, the curve of his lips when he smiled. I could still recall, all too well, what it felt like to kiss those lips, and even letting the memory play in my mind again felt like something dangerous.

“You need any help with this new project, just let me know,” she offered.

“If you want to brainstorm over some wine, I’m here for it, okay?”

“Thanks, Haley,” I replied as I got to my feet again and started toward the office once more. “I might take you up on that.”

“Please do. I have a bottle I’ve been waiting to open.” She laughed, and we said our goodbyes.

I tried not to think about Jax as I made it back to the office. I had bigger things to focus on now, way more important than him, and I didn’t want to let anything get in the way of me taking care of them.

Susan was waiting by my desk as I got back, and she raised her eyebrows at me as I reached her.

“Well?” she prompted me. “How did it go?”

“Really well,” I told her at once, smiling broadly. I didn’t want to let her think for a second there was anything getting in the way of me doing this job. She had trusted me with it, and I had to prove myself to her every chance I got.

“They’ve narrowed it down to us and one other company,” I explained. “And they’re offering us both a paid trial so they can figure out who’s the better fit.”

“Great,” she replied, nodding. “Have you got any more details?”

“I’ll put together an overview for you later today,” I replied.

“And what about the other company?” she asked. “What do you think of them? Do you know much about them?”

I hesitated before I replied. I didn’t want to spill too much about my connections with Jax. She might think I had too much of an emotional investment if I did, and I wasn’t about to let anything stand in the way of me working on this project.

“No, I don’t know anything about them,” I replied casually. “I can look into them, though, if you like. See what we’re up against?”

“Maybe,” she replied. “But we don’t want to get distracted with them when we’ve got our own trial to put together.”

“Exactly,” I replied, and I guessed she must have been able to see a little nervousness on my face because she took a step toward me and planted a hand on my shoulder.

“You’re going to do great, Morgan,” she told me. “I have total confidence in you. Let me know if there’s anything I can do to help you with the campaign, okay?”

“I will,” I replied, and I smiled up at her thankfully. Knowing she

believed in me helped me believe in myself. I just had to beat out Jax. Not impossible, no way. I had been the one to get the first meeting with them, after all. He had just muscled in on it to prove a point. What point he was trying to prove, exactly, I was still trying to get to the bottom of, but I was going to figure it out, and once I had identified his weak point, I would use it to get the upper hand.

I pulled out some of the notes I had taken throughout the meeting, and I started looking over them, piecing together a plan of action for what I was going to do next.

But even as I stared at them, the words seemed to dance together in a jumble in front of my eyes. I wanted to know what to take from this, but there was only one thing on my mind right then—him.

Which was exactly what he wanted. I was sure of it. Exactly what he had been planning when he had managed to get into that meeting, exactly what he had wanted when he had followed me out of there and kept shit-talking me. He wanted me to think about him, to wonder what he was doing, how he was going about this. He was counting on it.

I kept waiting for the ideas to start flowing as I looked over everything I had. I wanted to get a move on with this, start coming up with something I could bring to them so they could see how serious I was about working with KICKS, but every time my mind turned back to the meeting, I found it hung up on the man who had been sitting next to me.

I thought the chemistry between us would have faded after all this time. Eased, at least. But if anything, it had just shifted into something else. It had turned into something competitive, sharp around the edges, a way for us to try and win out over each other after everything that had happened.

I really never thought I was going to have to see him again. Never in a million years did I imagine we were going to encounter each other in this kind of context, up against each other, fighting it out for the same prestigious contract. But he had made it his business to get himself in my way, and I wasn't going to let him win, wasn't going to let our past cause problems for me.

If people found out we had been involved, I knew they would have questions. They always did when it came to women in the industry. He would just be seen as a player, but they might doubt my commitment, worried I was going to drop what I was doing to chase him again. As if I ever would have gone anywhere near him. I didn't like repeating my past mistakes, and he was

just as much of an arrogant ass as he had been when we'd been dating before. Not exactly a glowing review on getting back together with him, that was for sure.

No, I was going to put my head down and do whatever needed to be done to make this work, once and for all. I was going to score that contract. I was going to get KICKS working with us, and I was going to enjoy the look on his face when he found out he had been beaten out by the woman he seemed determined to win against.

CHAPTER 7



JAX

I leaned back from my desk, stretching my arms above my head and sighing.

I had been in the office since seven this morning, my head buzzing with ideas of how I was going to take on this new project. The trial run with KICKS was seriously important, and I was going to nail it.

My eyes were starting to get a little blurry around the edges, though, and I knew I needed to take a break sooner rather than later. The only way to keep my head in the game was by resting up for a while, letting my mind turn over the big questions I had about the way all of this was going. There were a few details I needed to iron out, a few specifics I wanted to perfect before I thought about submitting, so when Derrick stuck his head around the door and invited me out for lunch, I accepted at once.

“Where do you want to go?” he asked me.

I shrugged. “How about the Korean place down the street?”

“Perfect,” he agreed. “You’ve been here since first thing this morning, right?”

“You can tell just by looking?” I replied.

He grinned. “You’ve got that look in your eyes,” he remarked. “Like you’re really into something. You want to bounce some ideas off me?”

“Sure,” I replied. I trusted his opinion. Derrick was always the guy you went to if there was a detail you just couldn’t figure out. His quiet demeanor and focus on taking in everything going on around him meant he was always full of good ideas, even if he would never be the first to come out and talk about them.

The two of us headed down to the restaurant and ordered. He leaned back in his seat and raised his eyebrows at me.

“So,” he remarked. “Tell me where you’re at.”

I filled him in on the deal with KICKS, catching him up on the conversation I’d had with them at the conference and that they had offered us a trial run to see if we were a good fit. I hesitated about telling him the other part, the part about Morgan, but as our *gimbap* arrived, he pressed the issue.

“Something else bothering you?” he asked.

I sighed. “There’s another company they’re giving the trial to as well,” I explained. “And the woman who’s working on it for them? I know her.”

“Oh?” he remarked, tipping his head to the side curiously.

I nodded. I didn’t know if it was a good idea to actually share the truth of what was going on with me right then, but I didn’t want to keep it from him. The two of us had worked together for long enough that I knew I could trust him, and it would do me good to get his sensible take on the way all of this was going to go.

“Yeah, the two of us, we dated for a year or so in college,” I explained. “Didn’t exactly end well.”

“You didn’t cheat on her, did you?” he asked, concerned.

I shook my head. I knew why he was asking. With my reputation, cheating would have made the most sense as the reason our relationship had fallen apart, but it wasn’t as simple as that. In fact, when we had been together, I hadn’t been the player I was now. Maybe it was because of what had happened between us that side of me had risen to the surface, a protective measure meant to keep me from getting too attached to anyone else and leaving myself open to the same kind of hurt in the process.

“She dumped me so she could focus on her career,” I replied. He let out a small snort of amusement at the irony of it. It wasn’t lost on me, either. All this time, she had been focused on what she wanted to do with the rest of her life, only to encounter me again in the process. I was sure she would have done anything she could to put real distance between us, but we were stuck together, even though we were at odds with each other.

“Oh, yeah?” he replied. “Must have been hard.”

“It was,” I replied. I didn’t want to admit, even to myself, just how hard it had really been. My heart ached when I thought about what had happened between us from the sheer hurt she had hit me with. She had been the first woman I had really fallen for, the first woman I’d been in love with, and the pain I’d felt when she had ended things had come as a shock.

Mainly because I hadn’t been expecting it. I had thought we could make

it work, even though she was so busy all the time. I was a little more laidback when it came to my studies, but she always told me she couldn't risk leaving any space for the doubt to creep in. She kept herself busy, focusing on what came next.

And I had admired it. It made me love her more, seeing how passionate and dedicated she was. I had never met any other woman like her at the time—any other woman who seemed to know exactly what they wanted and just how to get to it.

She was different from everyone around us. Everyone else seemed to fall so far behind her in comparison, and it was all I could do just to keep up.

But she had decided I was another distraction, getting in the way of what she wanted to stay focused on. No matter how much I tried to argue with her, tried to tell her that I would support her no matter what and I wanted to be there to help her in any way I could, she decided to end it. She didn't want anything to draw her attention away from what she had been working toward all this time, and I, it turned out, had just been another thing in the way of what she wanted to really pursue.

I was a distraction.

And so, she'd left me. And yeah, maybe I should have taken it better. Maybe that was where she got the image of me as this cocky, arrogant asshole, the guy she still seemed to think I was now. But I couldn't help it. I was hurt, and I had struck back by making a scene about the woman I dated after her.

I didn't want to stay single, or at least, I didn't want her to see me being single. I made sure to parade them around her, to show off all the women who actually wanted to be with me, every chance I got.

Even if I had never felt anything for them. Nothing like I had felt for her.

I did my best to keep my focus till the end of college, and when I was out, I promised myself I was going to forget about her. But more than that, I promised myself I was going to protect myself from ever getting hurt the way she had hurt me. I was going to do everything I could to keep myself from falling for anyone, from getting involved in anything serious.

It had been my turn to keep my focus on what was important. I wanted to get the company off the ground. Plenty of one-night stands and flings kept me motivated, but I had never let them turn into anything more. I couldn't risk it. Not after what had happened last time.

"You still into her?" Derrick asked me before he took a bite of the roll in

front of him.

I shook my head. “Hell no,” I replied, a little defensive. “You should hear the way she talks to me. It’s like she can’t stand the sight of me. I’m not putting my time into someone like that.”

“But something’s annoying about it, right?” he pressed. He could always tell when there was something bugging me, picking up on those cues I didn’t even know I was giving out.

“I guess,” I admitted after a long pause. “We never really got closure. And it still feels like there are threads hanging there, stuff we haven’t resolved. It’s irritating.”

“I can imagine,” he replied, nodding. “But you can’t let it get to you. You have to stay focused, right? We need this contract. And you can get it for us.”

“I know, I know,” I muttered. He was right. I didn’t want to let all of this get so deep under my skin I couldn’t shake it. I couldn’t let myself get drawn into this endless loop of feeling as though I couldn’t forget what had happened between us, couldn’t leave it behind.

We were done, over with, and nothing was going to change that. Whatever emotions lingered in the depths of my heart, I wanted them to go away.

“You’ve already slept with her, right?” he pointed out. “Not like you need to do it again. You just forget about her, leave her behind, and pretend your past never happened. It might as well not have, given where you’re at now.”

“You’re right,” I agreed.

“Besides, not like you’re going to have any trouble finding someone else to get her off your mind, right?” he pointed out.

I laughed, feeling a little swell of that cocky sureness rise up inside of me. If any one of us at the office had a reputation for enjoying our bachelor status, it was me.

“Yeah, exactly,” I agreed. I didn’t want to admit the truth to him, of course, that she had ripped out my heart and stomped on it, that she was the reason I was such a player now.

I had never let anyone get close to me like I had with her, and I missed the feeling we’d shared, the feeling like the two of us fit. I came home to a quiet, empty apartment at the end of every day now since my house was in a remodeling phase, and sometimes, the emptiness felt cavernous.

“She’s probably got a boyfriend now anyway,” I added, doing my best to convince myself. I hadn’t seen a ring on her finger, so I knew she wasn’t

married, but she wouldn't have had a hard time finding a guy who would be as blown away by her passion and her beauty as I was—or had been.

I wasn't going to give her a chance to hurt me again. I knew she would take it, especially now that the two of us were in competition with each other. She knew she had to use all the tools at her disposal to win, and I was certain she wouldn't hold back on making me pay if I showed her even a scrap of vulnerability again.

“Some things are better left in the past,” Derrick told me.

I nodded in agreement. He was right. Whatever had gone down between us, it was well and truly behind us now, and I wasn't going to be stupid enough to go digging it up again.

And I was sure she wanted to forget about it just as much as I did.

CHAPTER 8



MORGAN

I stepped out of the car and eyed the factory in front of me, pulling out my notebook so I could jot down anything that came to mind while I was here. There was so much I wanted to investigate, so much I wanted to add to my findings, as much as I was able, to enhance the campaign I was putting together and make sure I delivered something exactly in line with what they were looking for.

The KICKS factory was pretty small for the time being, but they would have to expand soon. The orders and buzz were already kicking up a notch, and keeping up with it from this building was going to pose a major challenge. I would have to mention that to them, make sure they were looking to move to somewhere a little bigger as soon as they got the chance. Not to mention the fact that it would be majorly flattering to hear they were outgrowing their current factory, and I wanted to do everything I could to get them looking forward to seeing me.

I was a week out from the meeting where they had gifted us the trial project, and I had been working my ass off ever since. Susan had consulted with me where she was able, but for the most part, she was leaving it up to me to handle everything. I appreciated her trust in me, but it meant the pressure was even higher than ever. If I messed up, then it was all going to be on me, and there was no getting away from it. I had to nail it. I didn't have any other choice.

The man who signed me in smiled when he saw me come into the reception area, lifting a hand to greet me.

"You're Morgan, right?" he asked me, and I nodded. I almost wanted to correct him, tell him to call me by my surname, but I knew it wouldn't have

gone down well. I had to remember I needed to get as many people as possible to like me. If they wanted to work with me, it was going to be easier to convince their bosses to approach me in the same way.

“I think one of your colleagues is already here,” he told me. “Let me go find him for you so you can go around the factory together.”

My stomach dropped. A colleague? I knew I was the only one from our office who had been sent out here today, so that meant there was only one person it could be, and he was about the very last person on Earth I wanted to lay eyes on right now.

Sure enough, the man returned a few moments later with Jax in tow. Jax flashed me a cocky grin as soon as he laid eyes on me, and I tensed up, hoping he couldn't tell how thrown I was. I offered him a smile, hoping that the guy who had greeted me couldn't tell how annoyed I was to be faced by the very last person on Earth I wanted to see right now. As soon as he backed off, telling us to take a look around the factory at our leisure, I lowered my voice and took a step toward him.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demanded.

He raised his eyebrows at me as though he didn't have a clue what I was getting at. “What do you mean?”

“Are you following me?” I asked him.

He chuckled. “Morgan, I was here before you,” he pointed out. “If anything, I should be asking if you're the one following me around, right?”

I closed my eyes, pinched the bridge of my nose, and took a deep breath. I knew he was right, but it pissed me off like nothing else to hear him talking that kind of shit to me.

“Fine,” I replied. “Let's do this. I have to be back at the office in an hour.”

“Oh, I've got all day here,” he remarked casually as we headed through the door to the main factory floor. “Upside of working for yourself, I guess.”

I knew he was trying to rile me up, and the best defense I had against him was just keeping my cool and not letting him get to me.

I tried to walk a few paces ahead of him so I could have the space to focus on my own work and not let him bother me. The place was bustling with activity as workers boxed up orders in their custom sleek KICKS boxes and sent them out to consumers. It was the first time I'd actually had a chance to look at the shoes up close, and they really were cool. I could totally see them on the feet of some chic runner out for a jog in the park while they

showed off their perfectly curated ensemble or filling up the feeds of social media influencers' gym selfies.

I took a few notes, and I glanced around to make sure he wasn't trying to get a look at what I was jotting down. I wouldn't have put it past him. I knew what he was like, how he could be, and I wasn't trying to share my insights with him.

"Could you step back?" I asked him bluntly. "You're a little too close for me right now."

"Shit, Morgan, I didn't realize you were so precious." He laughed, and I bit back a snarky comment. I couldn't let him distract me. I didn't have a whole lot of time here, and the last thing I wanted was to spend it arguing with him. I turned my attention back to the shoes in front of me, jotting down another couple of notes.

"Were you always like this?" he asked.

I couldn't help it. I turned, eyebrows raised. "Always like what?"

"Always this much of an..." He trailed off, but I knew where he was going with it. He didn't have to finish it off for me.

"An asshole?" I told him.

He shrugged. "Yeah, something like that."

I shifted my gaze away from him, but his words lingered at the back of my mind. I didn't like being called an asshole. Hell, I knew nobody did, but it stung coming from him. I knew I had changed since the two of us had been together, but was it really that blatant?

I had thought I had enough of the girl I used to be left for him to be able to recognize me, but maybe I was just hoping that because I couldn't face up to the reality of what I might have been otherwise.

"Because you can't be a pushover in this line of work," I replied. "And you know that as well as I do."

"Yeah, there's not being a pushover, and then there's pushing people over to get what you want," he shot back.

"You don't get it," I replied, shaking my head. "What it's like being someone like me in this industry. A woman. People look at you differently. You can't give them an inch. Otherwise they'll walk right over you, and there's nothing you can do to stop them."

"Is that so?" he muttered.

I could tell he didn't entirely believe me. I almost wanted to snap at him, but I knew it would only prove my point.

And maybe he was right. When we had been dating, things had been different. I hadn't been as focused on my career as I was now. Hell, it was the focus I'd shown then that had gotten me to the point I was at now. I wouldn't have changed a thing about it. But sometimes, I looked back, and I knew so much had changed. I could tell that a huge amount had shifted out from underneath me, and I wasn't sure what it was going to take to get that side of me back.

If she was even there at all anymore. Sometimes I didn't know.

But you didn't get far in this world by just sitting back and playing nice. You had to be ready to fight, ready to kick ass, and I had done that over and over again until people had no choice but to take me seriously.

Him? He had it easier, whether he wanted to admit to it or not.

I looked over at him, about to protest, but as soon as our eyes locked, something shifted inside me. It was like I was looking at the man I had dated back in college, the guy who I had fallen for so hard and so fast. I tried not to think about what we'd had when we had first gotten together because it was just a little too painful for me to recall how much we had cared about each other, how kind he had been, the way he had supported me through so much. There were so many nights when I found myself just venting to him, and he would listen, take it all in, take my side no matter what.

But now? This guy standing in front of me, he was an asshole. He might have talked to me like he thought I had changed, but he had no right to talk, especially after the way he had managed to get this trial in the first place. If he hadn't seen me there, talking to them at the booth, I doubted he would have cared about them at all. He just wanted the chance to get one over on me, prove he was still coming out on top.

Which was pathetic when I thought about it. It had been years since we'd split, and he hadn't exactly waited around when it came to finding someone else. Was he still so hung up on it? Still so sure he needed to make me pay?

We made it through the rest of the tour without much more to say to one another, and I did my best not to let my mind linger on what had just sprung up at the back of my head. I knew better than to let myself get hung up on him. I knew that. I knew what kind of person he was. The way he had treated me had made that clear, and I wasn't going to turn into some simpering mess just because we had a past together.

Still, as we walked out side by side, I couldn't help but steal a look at him, and I found him looking right back at me. Was he thinking the same

things as me? Reminded of the good times, even though they were so far away now? I wished I could ask him, but there was no way I was going to expose myself to that kind of scrutiny.

“You want to grab dinner?” he asked me suddenly, catching me off guard.

I turned to him, certain I must have heard him wrong because there was no way he had just invited me out, was there?

“What?”

“To talk about the tour,” he replied. “Maybe we could bounce some ideas off each other.”

I parted my lips in surprise and then shook my head.

“I’m good, thanks,” I replied, trying not to sound too surprised. What was this? Some way for him to throw me off my game? I couldn’t help but wonder. Maybe he was trying to spook me, get me to mess up and forget what I was supposed to be focused on here. Much as I wished I could just shut him down without a second thought, I had to admit that there was a part of me that wanted to say yes to him. Out of curiosity, more than anything else, but still.

He pulled a card from his pocket and handed it to me.

“If you change your mind, you know where to find me,” he told me, and with that, he hailed a cab, stepped into it, and took off down the street.

I stared down at his card for a moment, reading his name on the small, crisp business card in front of me. His number right there alongside it. And, suddenly, I felt this connection to him again, a connection I hadn’t felt for a long time. I didn’t know why he had just handed me this or where he expected it to go from here, but having his number again? Yeah, something about that felt good.

As I tucked it away in my pocket, I felt a smile playing at the corners of my lips.

CHAPTER 9



JAX

I poured out the wine just as I heard a knock on the door. I went to answer it. Sure enough, my twin brother, Max, was on the other side, ready for an evening of dinner, drinks, and a chance for me to vent about what was going on with Morgan. Lucky for me, his girlfriend, Judy, had something she had to do.

“Jax, good to see you,” he told me as he stepped inside, but he was already scanning around for the wine. He grabbed it as soon as he spotted the glass and took a long, grateful sip.

“God, I needed that,” he remarked.

I grinned at him as I went over to the stove to pull the pasta dish I had been cooking off the heat. “Long day?” I asked.

He nodded. “Hell, yeah,” he replied. “What about you? You still working on that thing for the shoe company?”

“KICKS, yeah.” I served up our food and took us along to the table with a view down over the city. The house I owned had an amazing view across the glittering urban lights below us, and in the darker evenings like this, it looked almost like something out of a fantasy movie.

I was glad to have the company tonight. I wasn’t sure what had gotten into me when I had asked Morgan out for dinner, but of course, she had turned me down at once because she wasn’t totally crazy, I guessed. She had looked at me like she was sure she had heard me wrong, and when I had given her my card, I had half-expected her to toss it away right there on the spot. I had left before she had a chance to, though.

Seeing her again, working, it had been strange, to say the least. There was something about this other side to her that I just didn’t recognize. I knew it

was normal for people to change, and I knew the kind of person you had to be to succeed here, but still, she was so far removed from what I had known.

“You don’t normally have company in the evenings,” Max remarked as he took his seat opposite me. “Not my company, anyway.”

“Yeah, guess it’s just been that kind of week,” I replied.

“What kind?”

“It’s been weird seeing Morgan again,” I replied finally as I picked up my wine and spun the liquid around the glass. I didn’t know exactly what I was feeling, but it was making something in me shift, and I didn’t like it. I had been solid in who I was for such a long time, and running into her again, seeing her like this, it threw me. I didn’t like that, not one little bit.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I continued. “We saw each other today when I went down to the factory to look over some stuff for the KICKS trial. I didn’t expect to run into her, but we got lumped together on this tour of the factory, and she’s so different to how I remember her.”

“How do you mean?” he asked, curious. He’d met her a few times, so I figured if anyone had some insight into what it was about her that had changed, it would probably be him.

“She just seems more ruthless than she did before,” I said. I wasn’t certain how to put it into words, but those seemed the closest. She had changed, something in her shifting so she could handle the line of work she had chosen. I supposed it shouldn’t have come as too much of a shock to me, but there was a part of me that longed for the person she had been before, the woman I had fallen for all those years ago.

“Yeah, well, you’ve got to be if you want to get anywhere in this industry, you know that,” he pointed out.

I sighed. Yeah, he had a point, but still, something about it bugged me. “I just know she’s not like that, not really,” I continued. “There’s a person with a good heart under there.”

“I doubt she’s going to go out of her way to show that to her ex of all people,” he remarked, cocking an eyebrow. “Can you blame her for it? Not many people give too much of a damn what an old boyfriend or girlfriend thinks of them.”

“I guess you’re right,” I agreed. I couldn’t argue with that. I knew he had a point, and yet, there was a nagging part of me that wanted to get to the bottom of what had shifted inside her, to find out if it had been part of the

reason why she had left me in the first place.

“Shit, look at how much you’ve changed,” he remarked, shaking his head. “You can’t exactly blame her for growing up, either.”

“How do you mean?”

“Come on.” He laughed. “You were thinking about buying her a ring. Not exactly there anymore, are you?”

“Shit, I forgot about that,” I groaned, even though it was a lie.

“Yeah, do you remember going to the jewelry store with me when you were—what, you must have just turned nineteen?” He leaned back in his seat and gazed off into space like he was casting his mind back to that fateful day.

“Yeah, distantly,” I replied, shaking my head. The truth was, I could still remember that day like it was yesterday. I’d asked Max to come with me to help pick out an engagement ring for Morgan. We’d been together just over a year at that point, and, in that way you do when you’re nineteen, I was sure about her. Totally and utterly sure.

I wanted to propose to her at the end of our second year of college, make it official, once and for all. We’d talked a little about the future, and that was enough for me to make the move and take things to the next level.

I could still remember how incredulous my brother had been, clearly doubtful about whether or not this was a good idea, but he couldn’t have talked me out of it for anything. I was certain about her. I knew I wanted to be with her. And I knew I couldn’t live without that sweet, ambitious, driven woman in my life, so I did what made the most sense. I went to look at rings with my brother.

I hadn’t had a whole lot of cash to my name then, and the ring I wanted was super expensive. I left without buying it, but it stayed on my mind. A few days later, I pawned an old gaming console and got enough money to purchase it. I could still remember looking down at the ring in the box, the way it glittered, and grinning as I thought about the look on her face when I gave it to her.

Max had no idea about that part, of course, and I wasn’t going to volunteer that information to him now. No, I wanted to keep it to myself, make sure nobody found out how far I had taken things, how sure I had been about her. I’d held on to the ring for a couple more months, planning the day I was going to propose to her, but she had left me before I’d had the chance, leaving me holding the ring and feeling like a full-blown fucking idiot.

I’d never gotten rid of it. I just couldn’t bring myself to. That ring was a

promise, the promise of a future I had never been able to live out, and getting rid of it would have been letting go of that for good. I knew I couldn't even have given it to someone else because it was only ever meant for one person.

Morgan.

I took another sip of my wine, hoping the alcohol would be enough to help me forget about the mess going on inside my head right now. There was so much I wanted to know, so much I wanted to ask about the person she was now, but it was clear she had no interest in catching me up on what had shifted since the last time we had seen one another.

"She's just doing her job," Max remarked, turning the conversation back to my opinion of her newfound personality. "Don't take it personally. How many assholes have you met in this industry? Don't let her get under your skin just because the two of you dated before."

"You defending her?" I asked my brother, cocking my head to the side. I knew it wasn't fair to act like he was on her side when he was just doing what he could to get me out of my head, but I needed him to see where I was coming from.

I needed him to see how strange this was, how different she seemed. He had known her back then. He knew what kind of person she was. Maybe if he'd had a chance to meet her now, he would see where I was coming from, and I would feel less crazy for thinking something was up with her.

"You need to get her out of your head, focus on what you're doing," he told me.

I knew he was right. If there was one thing I had learned from my years in this business, it was that you couldn't let anyone else's shit get in the way of what you were doing. You had to keep your eyes on your own paper.

"Yeah, I know," I muttered, looking down at the table in front of me.

"What's getting to you about her?" he asked, leaning forward. "Not like you haven't been with plenty of women since the two of you had your thing."

"Yeah, but I was in love with her," I reminded him. It had been a long time since I had said those words out loud, and hearing them come out of my mouth was kind of a shock. I hadn't been in love with anyone since her, and I was pretty certain that was why I was having such a hard time being around her again.

There might have been women in between us, but there hadn't been any women in between our love, and that was fucking me up. Seeing her again, it opened up a wound I thought had long since healed.

“I know,” Max replied gently. He could see how much this was getting to me, even as I tried to push it down inside of me, even as I tried to make the pain of it go away.

“But that was a long time ago, and you have a job to do now,” he added. “You don’t want to let some ancient history get in the way of that, right?”

“Right,” I muttered. I wanted to believe him. I really did. But I couldn’t stop thinking about the ring, buried in the back of a drawer somewhere, still waiting to slip onto her finger.

After all these years, why did that thought still feel so right to me?

I didn’t say a word about the ring to Max. I knew he would have been shocked, and I didn’t want to admit how serious my feelings for her had been. I knew he saw what we had as this college fling, but it was the most impactful relationship I’d ever had in my life.

She was clearly well and truly over it, though. The way she looked at me, the way she talked to me, she had no interest in picking up where we’d left off or even acknowledging what had happened between us. I would do well to keep up with that energy, match her indifference to me and everything we’d shared.

And yet, still, all I wanted was to show her the ring I’d bought her all those years ago and ask her if it would have changed things between us if I had actually given it to her.

Max and I finished up dinner, and I was clearing the plates away when my phone buzzed. I went to grab it, assuming it was going to be Max texting to tell me he’d forgotten something and would need to stop by and pick it up.

But instead, there she was. A message from Morgan.

A smile crossed my face before I could stop it, a flash of excitement at seeing her name pop up in front of me. I wanted to hear from her. I did. I wanted to talk to her, even though I was sure I should have known better, even though I knew I shouldn’t have been so quick to find myself attached to her all over again.

She was texting me to ask for the two of us to meet for dinner, just so we could talk about how this business relationship was going to go. It sounded casual, but it was laced with more meaning than that. I could tell.

I was sure she didn’t want to admit it, but there was a hell of a lot of history between us, and shutting that down after so much time was going to be harder than she made it out to be.

I texted back to agree at once, then finished clearing up, but now, my

mind was racing as I thought about what was going to happen next. What was going to happen now that the two of us had found each other again?

And where exactly was this going to take us?

CHAPTER 10



MORGAN

I twisted my leg back and forth in front of the low mirror, checking out the boots. I had to admit, they looked good. As soon as I had seen them on the shelf, I'd known I needed to give them a go. With a sharp spiky heel, a tall knee-length cut-off, and sleek glossy leather, they were perfect, exactly what I needed for the event I was facing for the first time today.

"Oh, my God, I love those on you." Haley sighed as she stood behind me, shaking her head. She was gazing at the boots as though they had been gifted from the heavens.

I grinned. "You think I can pull them off?"

"I think you can pull off anything if you put your mind to it," she replied. "Are these for dinner tonight?"

"They might be." I unzipped the boots and went to take them up to the cashier to buy them. I needed a little boost if I was going to get through the evening ahead of me, and any little bonus I could get to push my confidence up a little was a welcome step up from where my head was right now.

I paid for the boots, and Haley linked her arm through mine as we wandered back out into the mall. She had invited me out shopping when she had found out I was going to be heading out with my ex, and I was glad for the distraction, to be honest. Anything to keep my head full and my mind off how intense this evening was going to be.

"It's just business tonight, right?" she asked, cocking an eyebrow at me.

I nodded. "Of course it is," I replied.

"So why do you need to get a glam pair of boots for it, then?" she asked me, grinning playfully.

I rolled my eyes at her, laughing. "I'm not wearing them to impress him,"

I assured her. "I'm wearing them for me. To make me feel better. Someone like him? Trust me, he's going to do everything he can to throw me off, and I'm not going to let it happen."

"You think he still has it out for you?" she asked.

"I think he wants to get this contract, no matter what it takes," I replied, shaking my head. "And I'm not willing to give him an inch. Better to be sure, you know? Lay down the law before he can go ahead and get away with it."

"You never did tell me what happened between the two of you," Haley remarked as she stooped down to look at some necklace in a shop window.

I paused for a moment. There was a reason for that, a reason I really didn't want to have to go into if I could avoid it. We had met not long after things had ended between us, and the last thing I had wanted to talk about then was my damn ex.

She must have known that. She had never pushed for the truth of what had happened between us, but I supposed, now that he was back in my life, it was no wonder she had some questions.

"Nothing, really," I lied quickly. "It was just a relationship when we were both teenagers. You know, first love, and all of that."

"First love can be a heavy thing," she remarked as she straightened back up and took my arm again. "You guys really cared about each other, huh?"

"Yeah, I guess we did," I admitted. I really didn't want to go into this too much with her, but Haley had a way of getting me to give up whatever was going on in my head, getting me to let go of all the defenses I put in place to keep everyone out. She had an openness about her that made it hard to hold back, one of her most endearing traits.

"So what happened to break the two of you up?" she wondered aloud. "If you were really into each other, I mean."

I sighed. "It was just a college thing. It was never going to be anything serious. I knew that I had to focus on my career, and no matter how much fun we were having, the chances of that relationship actually lasting were super slim. I didn't want to gamble everything on it working out when I had no idea if it would, you know?"

"You're always so analytical with this stuff," she remarked as we continued to make our way down the crowded thoroughfare of the mall.

"Yeah, well, it's much more rewarding in the long run to put all that effort into your career than it is into a man," I pointed out. "You know that your career is never going to meet someone younger and hotter and dump

you when it gets the chance.”

“You think he would have done that to you?”

“Yeah, probably,” I lied. It wasn’t true. Even though he was something of a flirt when we were together, he always made it clear it was nothing but fun and games for him, and I was the only one he really wanted. If he ever saw me getting even a little annoyed, he would drop it at once and focus all his attention on me.

I had loved that about him, loved how he had focused all his energy on making sure I was happy. I knew he cared for me. Not many guys would have been able to read that, but he was so attentive with me, always wanting to make sure I was happy, always wanting to make sure I knew how much he cared for me.

And I did. I really did. I believed it, totally. I saw my other friends around me in relationships with guys who seemed to find every chance they could to make them insecure, but he had been totally dedicated to me.

He was the only guy I had ever been able to see a future with, and that had, to some degree, really spooked me. I didn’t want to admit how intense my feelings were for him. It just seemed more than I would be able to take. The thought of coming clean and telling him how much faith I had in him, how much I loved him and wanted to be with him, scared the hell out of me. I had used my career as an excuse, and to a degree, there was truth to it, but if I was being entirely honest with myself, it was a chance for me to put as much distance between myself and the intensity of my feelings for him as possible.

“He’s probably seeing someone anyway,” I remarked.

Haley laughed. “You’ve been thinking about that, have you?”

“I mean, of course I have. He is my ex, after all,” I pointed out.

“Your ex who you still have some feelings for, right?” she asked.

I rolled my eyes skyward. “I don’t have feelings for him,” I protested, but I knew she had seen something I was trying to keep under wraps. I didn’t want to have to admit to her what was going on in my mind right now, the mess of emotions seeing him again had drawn up in me. I had thought I was stronger than that, smarter than that, but being around him made my head spin.

And the thought of spending a whole dinner with him? Yeah, that was enough to get me feeling some serious type of way.

“Hey, you can have feelings for him and not do anything about them,” Haley pointed out. “You’re a grown-ass woman. You can just focus on the

business side of things, can't you?"

"Exactly," I agreed, nodding as I tightened my grip on the bag my boots had come in.

"And sexy boots aren't going to make it harder, at least," she teased.

I laughed. "You're not going to stop giving me shit about these damn shoes, are you?"

"Hey, I'm never going to argue with the power of a good pair of boots," she told me. "If that's what it takes to get you feeling strong enough to take him on, I say go for it."

"I appreciate the vote of confidence," I replied.

She grinned at me. "I'm always on your side, you know that," she reminded me warmly.

And I did. I needed her on my side right now actually. It was strange, the thought of spending time with him again, after we'd been apart for so many years, and I wanted to pull on all the strength I could get. My mind was rushing with questions about how I felt about him and how he felt about me.

But this wasn't about how we felt. This was about how we were going to handle each other now that we were business rivals. The wrinkle of our previous relationship was nothing more than that, a wrinkle, and soon, I would find some way to iron it out. Yes, it might be more complicated than if we hadn't known each other, but I didn't care. I was too smart than to let any man get under my skin like that.

Let alone a man like him.

CHAPTER 11



JAX

When I arrived at the restaurant, she was already sitting there, waiting for me. I was surprised she had gotten there so early, but I shouldn't have been. She knew as well as I did being the first person in the room always gave you the upper hand. As it was, I would be walking into her territory. I would have to play by her rules.

She had picked a small Italian place for dinner, though I would have met with her anywhere, and I was sure she knew it. She smiled tightly when she saw me approaching the table, and I wondered if she was nervous about this. If she was, she was doing everything she could not to show it.

She rose to her feet as I approached, extending her hand as I closed in.

I arched an eyebrow. "Formal," I remarked as I took her hand.

She locked eyes with me, narrowed them slightly. "This is a business meeting, Jax," she told me. "Not a date. A handshake is appropriate."

There was no point arguing with her. I knew how she got when she had an idea in her head, and nothing in the world could have shifted it. I took my seat opposite her, leaned back, and looked her up and down.

I had to admit, she looked fucking hot as hell. Did she know that? Know how much she turned me on? Her slender legs in the nylon stockings, along with a pair of sharp high-heeled boots that hugged her calves. She must have known she looked sexy. Maybe this was part of her strategy, planning to throw me off in any way she could. She wasn't stupid, and she must have known the effect she had on me, even after all these years.

"Good to see you," I remarked to her as she pushed the menu across the table to me.

"You too," she replied. Her voice was unreadable, deliberately so, and I

knew she was doing everything she could to make sure she didn't give away what was really going on inside her head. She was always careful about that, always careful about letting anyone see what was under the façade she built up to hide from the rest of the world. I had admired that about her, but only when I knew I got to see beneath the mask. Now, I wasn't so sure she would give me the chance.

"You look well," she remarked, her eyes skimming up and down my body.

"Is that your way of telling me you like what you see?" I teased.

A smile flickered over her face. "You know I just say what I mean, Jax."

"I remember," I agreed. "So, you been to this place before? What's good on this menu?"

Soon, the conversation moved to food, to our favorite places to eat in the city, to the best way to make sure you got pizza dripping with toppings at the walk-in places downtown. It was amazing to me how easily the conversation seemed to flow between us, as though we had never been apart at all. It was hard to believe she had been so distant to me for so long, so removed and far from my life.

I almost wanted to bring up what we'd had before, but I was sure she would have shut that down as inappropriate for a work meeting, too. But she had to admit, there was that same chemistry there, the same chemistry we'd shared way back in the day when we had been together. It was easy for us to talk, so easy that we went through three courses without running out of things to say to each other.

But neither of us brought up our past, as though we were studiously avoiding mention of it. I couldn't blame her. If we touched on it, if we opened that door, there would be no walking back from it. And the two of us, sitting opposite each other, staring into each other's eyes like this, it was safer not to even acknowledge what we'd shared before. Safer not to go near it, for fear of bringing up old feelings.

We shared a bottle of wine, and I found my eyes lingering on her legs in those nylons, the skirt clinging to her hips when she got up to head to the bathroom. Was it just because I knew how gorgeous she was under there, or was it something else keeping my attention? I wished I didn't feel this desire for her. I knew it was clouding my judgment, but it wasn't as though I could just turn it off.

When she came back to the table, I decided to shift the conversation to

something more direct. There was a reason she had invited me here tonight, and it was nothing to do with having a catch-up.

“So, what exactly are you here to talk about?” I asked as I waved down the waiter to order some wine. I was going to need a drink if I was going to get through this, especially with her looking like that.

“I want to talk about the contract,” she told me. “With KICKS.”

“Oh, yeah?” I remarked. “You want to pick my brain about it?”

“I want to ask you to drop out.”

My eyes widened with shock. She looked back at me, not moving her gaze from mine. I wondered if she was joking, but I knew she would never joke about something like this. No, she had it in her mind this was the right call, and I was beyond shocked she was sitting there opposite me, admitting it. She must have known how crazy it sounded.

“You want me to drop out,” I repeated after her, making sure I had heard her correctly.

She nodded. “I think it’s the right thing to do,” she replied.

“Why, because you don’t think you can beat me?”

“No,” she replied. “Because I think everyone is going to be looking to you for this. Because you’re a man, and you know people will take you more seriously than they will me.”

I didn’t reply. I knew she had a point. Much as I liked to believe this industry didn’t see shit like that, I would have been stupid to deny it. And I was sure she had experienced a whole hell of a lot more from that side than I had. Who was I to deny it?

“I’m not backing out of this competition,” I told her. “And honestly, I’m surprised you would show this kind of weakness to me.”

I saw a flicker of doubt in her eyes, just for a second, as though she had thought I would just accept this at face value and let her walk out of here having won it. But no matter what other forces were at play within the industry here, I wanted this to be a fair competition, and she wasn’t going to get that if I just politely got up and let her take over.

“And I know you don’t want to win this just because I pulled out,” I continued, leaning in closer to her. She didn’t take her eyes off of me. I could see a flash of emotions in her eyes. Maybe the wine had unlocked more than she thought it would.

“You want to win because you’re the best,” I continued. “And you’re never going to believe that if you get this contract because I backed off.”

“Yeah, well, consider this me asking you to give me the win,” she replied. “I already got their attention. Not everyone could do that. If I get this, it’ll be the making of me, and you know that.”

“And you want to earn that, not have it handed to you,” I shot back. I could see she was getting annoyed, but she didn’t want me to see it in her.

“If you want to win this from me, you’re going to have to do it fair and square, the same way I would do with anyone else I was up against,” I added. “You’re just another competitor. You said this was business, right? So I’m going to treat it like business.”

I stared at her, waiting for her to find some other approach, waiting for her to admit that, underneath it all, no, there was still something personal here for her, between us, something she couldn’t even put into words. If she said that to me, maybe I would feel differently about all of this. Maybe I could admit it, too.

But she didn’t. She just shook her head.

“This will be the making of me, and I need it,” she told me again. “That’s why I got you here tonight. Because I wanted to ask you, as a professional who I respect, to take a step back, and let me have this moment.”

“You don’t want my damn charity, Morgan. I know you better than that,” I argued. “I know you have fight in you. And I know you’re not going to let me take this. You wouldn’t feel right if you just got it because I didn’t fight. You always wanted to prove yourself.”

“You’re talking like you know me,” she snapped back at me.

“I do know you, Morgan,” I replied, but she shook her head, leaning closer to me. She was angry now. I could tell I was getting under her skin.

“You know me from years ago. That’s not the same person I am now,” she protested. “That version of me? She’s different. This version, I know what’s best for me, and it’s not letting you cakewalk this because of who you are and who I am.”

Her voice was low and steady, as though she was trying to control her emotions. I almost smiled. I had missed her passion, how seriously she took all of this. She was always the person who got out ahead of everyone else because she knew what she was doing. She knew what it took to chase down everything she wanted, and she would put nothing ahead of it until she landed at the point she had been dreaming of.

“I’m not backing out, Morgan,” I told her firmly, and I meant it, without a doubt in my mind. I was doing her a favor, whether or not she could see it.

She didn't want me throwing in the towel, not when she knew she had a chance of beating me.

"Whoever puts together the better pitch, they're going to be the one who walks away with this, end of story," I told her. "I'm going to play fair. And I ask that you do the same, too. Me quitting? That's not fair, and you know it."

She glared at me for a long moment. As though she was expecting me to crack, expecting me to give in to the sheer intensity of how badly she wanted this, but that was never who I was, never who I had been. I might not have been willing to walk away from what we had for my career, but I was willing to fight for what I knew I deserved, and this contract was one of those things. She might have worked hard to get where she was, but so had I.

"Fine," she replied, and she pulled out her purse. "I'm paying. Thanks for the meeting."

With that, she headed to the waiter, got the bill, and paid up before I could say a word. I could afford the dinner, of course, but she didn't want to give me that, didn't want to give me the satisfaction of being able to treat this like a date where I got to flash my cash and show her how much money I had. She was successful in her own right, even if she was still trying to work her way to the top of the ladder.

She didn't even look back over her shoulder as she walked out. Not even letting me get one last glimpse at her. She didn't want to let me see her, not like this, not when she knew she hadn't gotten what she wanted from me.

I couldn't help but grin as I reached for my wine and took another sip. God, I had missed this passion in her, this focus, this attitude like she could take on the entire world and win. There weren't many people who had her fight, but she wielded it like a blade, ready to take out anything that got in her way.

But she didn't know who she was up against. She didn't know how far I'd come since the last time we had been together.

And she wasn't ready for how far I would go to win this.

CHAPTER 12



MORGAN

As I made my way across town to the KICKS factory to work on my proposal, I listened to Haley on the other end of the line, glad for the company right now.

After the dinner last night, my head had been a mess. Was he right? Was it crazy for me to ask him to pull out? He had acted stunned when I had come out with that, as though it had been the very last thing on his mind. Maybe it was. Maybe I was the one acting insane right now, the one who didn't know how to handle this.

I had showed him a weakness, and I knew he would go out of his way to exploit it. He might have framed it like he was doing me a favor, but I had worked in this industry long enough to be able to see right through that. If anyone from a rival company ever told you they were doing you a favor, it was your right to look that gift horse in the mouth.

"So how was it?" she asked me curiously. "Seeing him again like that, I mean. Must have been kind of strange, right?"

"Yeah, in some ways," I replied. "But it was good to clear the air. Talk about where we're at."

"And where do you think you're at?" she asked.

I knew what she was hinting at. My confusing feelings for Jax were at the forefront of my mind right now, especially after what he'd said to me last night. How was it that, after all this time, he still seemed to see me so clearly?

I thought I had managed to put some distance between us after everything we had been through, but he could still look at me and see right into my head, better than anyone else.

"We're just working against each other, that's all," I replied. "He's my

rival. I'm his. We're going to have to deal with it."

"Damn, I don't think I could handle working with someone I used to date." She sighed.

"I'm not working with him," I corrected her. "I'm working against him. We're against each other, right?"

"Of course, of course," she agreed. "What are you up to now?"

"I'm going to work on that proposal so I can kick his ass," I told her, and she laughed.

"That's my girl," she told me. "I'll catch up with you later today, okay? Maybe we could grab a drink after work."

"Sounds good," I replied, and we said our goodbyes just as I reached the factory. Linn, one of the partners, was waiting for me at reception as soon as I came in.

"It's great to see you again, Morgan," she told me. "I'm so happy you've decided to take on this project with us."

"I can't wait to show you what I've been working on," I told her brightly. I wanted to present my best face, put my best foot forward whenever I was around any of them. It might not have seemed like it, but every second with them was a job interview.

"We actually have a room put aside for you here, if you'd like to work at the factory," she explained. "Then you'll have access to anyone if you've got any immediate questions."

"That would be ideal," I told her warmly, and she led me down to the room so I could get to work. I wondered if there was some part of her that recognized herself in me, how hard she'd had to work to prove herself in this business, how hard she'd had to push compared to the men around her. I almost wanted to ask her, but no one liked to be reminded of how hard we'd had to work to get where we were. Especially not when I was trying to win her approval.

"So, how long do you think it'll be before we can get a look at something you've been working on?" she asked me as we made our way down the corridor.

"I'm hoping to have something to show you next week," I explained. "I want to make sure I have a polished product to put forward, so I want to take my time."

"Of course, of course," she replied. "Judging by everything else we've seen from you and your company, I imagine it's going to be great."

I smiled. This was a win. I didn't know what Jax was doing. Hell, I knew I should have been putting him out of my mind, really. But any advantage I could get over him, I was going to take, and this seemed like the win I needed right now.

I followed her along the corridor, which was lined with pictures, more than had been there the last time. In them, she was smiling along with the other partners, accepting awards, shaking hands, that warm corporate expression on her face. That would be me one day, picking up awards, accepting accolades for how hard I had worked to get there.

Maybe he'd had a point when he'd told me I wouldn't want his charity to win this. Much as it would have made my life easier if he had just backed off and let me take control, I would have always felt this nagging feeling, this doubt as though it could have been him if he had just decided to engage with the competition. I knew he was good at his job, and maybe it would be better for me to beat him out, better for my confidence to win against someone I knew I would have to fight to succeed against. Even if it was harder like this, when I finally got the contract, it was going to be that much sweeter.

The place was bustling with people, more than had been here when I had visited the first time. It was clear this place was up and coming, and, with my help, it was going to be even better than that.

We arrived outside the room she had put aside for me, and I thanked her. I felt a sudden rush of doubt when I put my hand on the door. What if Jax was inside? He was the last person I wanted to see right now, but I wasn't sure if he was going to give me a choice. He knew how seriously I took all of this, and he must have been aware that the only way to get ahead of me was to work his ass off.

No. There was no way he was going to turn up here so soon after we'd seen each other. I was sure he was down in his office right now, working hard, doing everything he could to get ahead of me. I just had to do the same thing while I had some peace and quiet. I would use this time here to talk to people around the office, pick up on the vibe of the place, and try and pull that into my campaign.

I pushed open the door, inhaling deeply. And when I saw who was on the other side, sitting in front of an open laptop, sipping on a coffee, my heart dropped.

No way.

Jax.

I felt myself tense on the spot, and he looked up and grinned at me. God, that fucking grin, that cocky smile like he knew he had managed to get one over on me and didn't care who knew it. How early had he gotten here to beat me to this place? I wanted to scream at him to get out, leave me to my work, but he would have just taken that as the sign he needed to stay. The sign he needed to make my life a little harder.

I took my laptop and planted it opposite him like I was laying down battle lines. I wasn't going to be scared off. I had already shown him a flash of weakness at dinner yesterday, asking him to pull out, and there was no way in hell I was going to let the same thing happen again now. I opened it up and stared down at the screen, even though the corners of my vision were blurring with how annoyed I was. I hated how easy it seemed for him to get under my skin and how obvious I was probably making it that he had managed to. I was meant to be better than this. Smarter. Stronger. And more able to fight off these nagging feelings for him.

Not that they were important. Not that they mattered at all, actually, because I was a grown-ass woman, just like Haley had said, and I knew better than to let matters of the heart get in the way of what I actually needed to do here. I blinked, trying to clear my vision, even though I could feel him looking at me. Waiting for a reaction probably. Doing everything he could to get me to doubt myself or maybe even hoping I would just up and leave him to this place.

But being in the factory was an advantage, and one I wasn't going to cede to him so easily. He was here because he knew it would boost his proposal, same reason I was, and there was no way I was going to let him steal that from me.

Not after what had happened last night.

CHAPTER 13



JAX

“Hope the two of you don’t mind sharing,” Linn chirped as she looked between the two of us. She must have been able to sense the tension in the air. How could she not? The room was thick with it, even as both of us tried our best to pretend we didn’t notice it. She would have had to be blind not to feel it, too.

I had arrived here early, planning to get some work done while I had the factory to myself. I figured she would likely be licking her wounds after things hadn’t gone her way at dinner the night before, but instead, there she was, sitting right opposite me, looking at her laptop as though she could hardly even tell I was there at all.

But I could tell she wanted to look at me. Tell she wanted to glare at me, glower at me, tell me to get the hell out of here and leave her to it. She had asked me to back out the night before, and now that I hadn’t, she knew she was going to have to work even harder to get what she wanted out of this. I almost had to admire how seriously she took it. Not many people would have had the nerve to keep fighting when they knew they were up against someone like me, but I knew her better than to think she would ever hold off on fighting with everything she had.

“Not at all,” I told Linn with a smile. I wanted to look easy to work with, and being in a room with my rival was the perfect way to make it happen.

“Great, well, you know where to find me if you all need anything,” she told us, smiling between us both.

Morgan smiled back at her, but I could tell it was slightly strained, as she did all she could to keep her irritation with me from showing on her face.

She backed off and closed the door behind her. I expected Morgan to

come out with some snarky comment, but she just kept her eyes fixed on the screen, like her life depended on it. The silence between us hung there, everything we had talked about last night hanging heavy over our heads.

She started tapping away on her computer, almost pointedly, as though she wanted me to know she was here to work and not for anything else. I couldn't help but smirk as I continued to work away on my computer. As soon as she noticed, her eyes darted up, and she narrowed them in my direction.

“What are you smiling at?” she asked me.

I looked up at her, amused. “Why are you paying so much attention to me?” I fired back. “Don't you have your own work to be getting on with right now?”

She lowered her gaze back down to the screen, and I could see how irritated she was with herself for letting me see her looking at me. She wanted to pretend like she didn't feel anything between us, any of the tension, any of the desire, but she was lying to herself as much as she was lying to me.

I sipped my coffee and occasionally stole glances up at her, wondering if she was going to do or say anything about the night before. I had come down here precisely because I knew she would be on the move, doing everything she could to make sure she got out ahead of me, and it must have been driving her crazy that I was totally in control here. That I had gotten here first.

I could see it all going on inside her head, even though I was sure she would have done everything she could to deny it. It was almost funny to me, but if I so much as smiled, she would notice something was up, and she would be onto me like a shot.

I wanted nothing more than to be able to break the tension between us, once and for all. To push forward and shatter this silence, tell her I knew she could feel it, too, and I didn't want to spend any longer pretending I didn't notice the chemistry between us. It had been so long since we'd been together, and yet, the sheer heat of it was enough to make my mind spin, make my body ache for her just the way it had the first time we'd been together.

I'd been with plenty of women since her, of course I had, but I'd never felt what I had with her with anyone else. That passion, it only came when the two of us were together, only came when we were by each other's sides. Even though I wanted to pretend I didn't feel it, wasn't consumed by it, there

was no way for me to duck and dive away from it. I wanted her. I wanted her badly. I wanted to know if she would feel the same, if she would move the same way, if she still made the same noises when she—

Before my mind could stray any further down that dangerous path, she got to her feet, stretching her arms up over her head and letting out a sigh. I looked up at her. Did she know how attracted I was to her? She must have. She must have been able to see how useful it would be in this competition we were in. I was helpless in the face of it. I hated knowing she had that power over me, but at the same time, the desire was clouding any thought of this competition. I just wanted her. Any way I could have her, I wanted her.

She moved around the room, and I glanced around and saw her eyes fixed on my computer screen.

“What are you looking at?” I asked as I moved to tilt the screen down a little.

“Nothing,” she replied. “What, you think I’m trying to steal your ideas?”

“No, but I think you know better than to let a chance to find out what I’m working on slip through your fingers,” I replied.

“If you’re so sure about it, you can just show me,” she told me almost casually, like she was daring me. “Not like I’m going to do anything with it. I already have my own approach mapped out. I’m not going to rely on yours.”

“Oh, yeah, sure.” I laughed. “You really think I’m falling for that?”

“Just let me have a look,” she replied, and she ducked down to try and see what was on my screen.

“Back off!” I protested, but I couldn’t help it. I was laughing. She was acting so ridiculous, and I was sure she could see it just as well as I could.

“You’re just scared that I’m going to have a better idea than you,” she teased me, provoking me into responding. She knew just what buttons to press with me, and I liked it. I liked being around someone who knew me so well, someone who understood what made me tick, even if I was sure she was just doing it for her own selfish reasons.

“And you wouldn’t even be trying to see what I’m working on if you didn’t have doubts about what you were doing,” I pointed out to her. “Eyes on your own paper, McClintock. You know that.”

She leaned on my back, suddenly so close to me it made it hard to think straight. She knew just what she was doing to me, and I couldn’t deny it, either. I liked it. Liked it more than I should have. I could hear all my better senses telling me to brush her off, tell her to get out of my personal space, but

everything else was urging me to keep going.

I slammed the laptop screen shut before she could catch a glimpse of anything I had been working on. I wasn't going to just hand her the ability to get under my skin like this, even though she was very much already there by now. She made my head throb with a million different questions at once, a million different things I needed to do and say, and she knew it. She could see it. She could feel it—and she could use it, too.

She let out a sigh as she leaned against me, leaning back for a moment. She was so close to me I could feel the rush of cool air against the back of my neck, and I felt the urge to turn around and kiss her while she was this near to me. Nothing more than muscle memory, I was sure of it.

And yet, that need was starting to get the better of me.

She leaned up on the desk, hopping up onto the spot next to my laptop. I raised my eyebrows at her.

“What are you doing there?”

“Waiting for you to get back to work,” she told me, kicking her legs back and forth beneath her as she looked down at me.

“I'm not going to work when you're sitting right there,” I told her, shaking my head. “Go back to your own side of the desk.”

“They put aside this room for us to work in, not just one side of the desk,” she pointed out to me. “I don't remember them saying we had to stay in a certain seat. Maybe I missed that?”

“Maybe you'd have heard it if you got here earlier,” I fired back.

She rolled her eyes. “Oh, yeah, just because I didn't crawl out of bed at the crack of dawn to spend my time doing nothing useful on a laptop.”

“You have no idea what I've been doing,” I told her.

She grinned. “So why don't you show me?” she replied. “Prove you've actually got a reason to be here.”

“I don't have anything to prove to you,” I told her firmly.

“You sure about that?” she asked, her tone playful, teasing, coaxing me into coming out with something. I wasn't going to let her get me to crack. I was smarter than that.

I hoped I was anyway.

She was looking down at me from where she was sitting on the desk, her lips slightly parted, as though there was something she wanted to say to me. I almost wanted to tell her to come out with it, say it out loud so we could clear the air, but I didn't want to turn this into a scene. We were at the KICKS

factory, after all, and one wrong move could bring everyone running down to see what was going on. I had no doubt she would find some way to spin it in her favor, even though she was the one who was trying to push my buttons with every bit of strength she had in her.

“Fine,” I replied, and I opened the laptop once more, turning my attention to the screen again. I could feel her watching me, and it was driving me downright crazy. I wanted to tell her to go, to get out of here, to leave so I could finally get back to thinking about what I was here to think about, but she wouldn’t have listened to a word of it. She had already decided how this was going to go, and I couldn’t fight it, even if I wanted to.

When it came to her, all I could do was go with the flow and hope I didn’t get swept away in the process.

She craned her neck around, trying to get another look at what I was doing.

“Morgan, are you serious right now?” I asked her, incredulous.

She smiled at me. God, she had the sexiest smile when she was in this kind of mood, the kind that seemed to light up her whole face—full of bad ideas, full of questions and answers she should never have even considered but that she couldn’t leave behind.

I rose to my feet, looked her in the eye. We were only standing a few inches apart, but she still didn’t move her gaze from mine, not for a second breaking eye contact. She knew if she did, she would be ceding ground, and she had never been the one to let something like that happen. No, when she had something in her head, she always followed through on it, no matter what, no matter how much she should have thought better of it, and I wasn’t going to get her to forget about all of that.

“You need to give me some space,” I told her. She tipped her head to the side, looking up at me.

“Or what?”

“Or,” I began.

But before I could say another word, she slipped her hands to my neck, pulled me in close, and planted her lips against mine.

CHAPTER 14



MORGAN

Even as our lips touched, I knew I was acting crazy. What the hell was I thinking? I knew better than to let myself get drawn into this desire again, but when the two of us were together, it felt like we had to get it out of the way, had to just cut through the bullshit and finally acknowledge what we had been trying to leave behind all this time.

He seemed surprised at first, pulling back as soon as our lips touched. But when he saw the expression on my face, he soon seemed to think better of that. Moving in again, he slipped his hands to my waist, grabbed hold of me tightly, and began to kiss me properly.

God, it felt like a lifetime since I'd had a chance to experience him like this, and he felt just as good as I remembered. He slid his hands down my back, his fingers trailing over my skin, and I wondered if, on some level, I had gotten dressed today with the intention of this happening. If I had picked up on all the tension and chemistry between us at dinner the night before, even as I tried to shut it down and ignore it. If I had wanted this since the moment I had seen him again, in that conference, and felt everything come flooding back before I was even able to think about stopping it.

Our tongues met and he moaned against my mouth, his hunger for me obvious and all-consuming. I couldn't get enough. I wrapped my legs around him, drawing him in close and pulling him into me, needing more of this, needing as much as I could get before good sense set in and I had to stop.

I could already feel him getting hard beneath his pants, and I had to have him inside me. Just once, just this one time, right? I had to tell myself that. I slid my hand down the front of his pants, feeling his cock as it swelled for me, telling me in every way that mattered that he wanted this as much as I

did.

He pushed up my skirt, reached between my legs, and ripped open my pantyhose. The noise made me jump, reminding me we were still at the factory, reminding me that anyone could have come by to check on us and found us in the middle of making out like our lives depended on it. It didn't matter to me, not really, not then. Everything else seemed to just fall by the wayside, distant and removed, as though it was all happening to someone else, not to me.

The only thing I could feel, the only thing I could focus on, was the intensity of his lips against mine as he moved his hand between my thighs to cup my pussy through my panties. I gasped against his mouth as he touched me, amazed at how oversensitive my skin was to his touch, even after all this time. He was bringing up sense memories, drawing forth the history we'd shared together just with a single caress, and I was sure he was totally aware of how much of an effect he had on me. I couldn't deny it, couldn't come close to denying it. I just wanted him. Wanted this. Wanted every little part of it I could get, any way I could have it.

"I need to be inside you right now," he told me as he unzipped his pants and produced a condom that he miraculously had in his pocket, rolling it down his impressive length.

Hearing those filthy words out of his mouth, the need in his voice, turned me on like nothing else. I spread my legs as I moaned, telling him without my words how much I needed it too, how much I needed him, even though everything else around this moment was total chaos and I was probably getting myself into more of a mess than I could handle. None of it seemed to matter. I didn't see how it could. When we were together, when he touched me like that, he reminded me just how good we had been together, and I couldn't let anything get in the way of it.

He pulled my panties aside and planted himself at the entrance to my pussy. I scooted to the very edge of the desk so I could make it easy for him to slide inside me. I looked down to watch as he entered me for the first time, the sight of him sliding deep into me almost surreal. We looked so good together, just like we always had before, just like we had always been. When he touched me, he knew me, he knew me from the inside out, and the thrill of it was like nothing else in the world.

He grasped my hips as he pushed into me, taking his time, until I was fully spread around his cock. His fingers were digging into my hips, holding

me close and tight, pulling me in against him as though I was the only thing in the world he cared about. Outside that door, there were dozens of people going about their usual daily lives, and they had no idea what was happening right here in the office, what we were up to right now, what we were getting away with. Somehow, it just turned me on even more, knowing how we were pushing our luck with this, knowing we were barely covered and we would be exposed if a single person walked in.

“I’ve wanted to do this since the moment I saw you at that conference,” he murmured to me as he held himself inside me, savoring the feel of me.

I wrapped my arms around him, pressing my head into his shoulder, inhaling the scent of him greedily. God, I loved having him like this. I had tried to forget about how good this part of our lives had always been, how well we had seemed to fit together, like we had been created just to fuck, like our bodies didn’t feel pleasure properly until we could find it in each other.

I moved against him as he continued to slide deep into me. I couldn’t hold myself back, not now we had started. I knew both of us would be kicked off this project if we were found out, if we were caught hooking up in the middle of a workday like this, but I didn’t care. The feeling of him inside me, filling me, taking me, making me his in all the ways I wanted him to, they made it feel as though it didn’t matter. Couldn’t matter, not one little bit.

He slipped his hands down to my ass, pushing me against him greedily. It was as though he couldn’t get enough of me, and I wanted as much as I could take. I was grinding against him, pushing back into him to allow him all the way inside me, right up to the hilt. My skirt was hiked up around my hips so I could get a good view of the two of us together, of our bodies coming together again the way I hadn’t even realized I’d missed as badly as I had. I’d been with other guys since him, but here, now, all of that seemed to fall away. It was just us, like it always had been. Just us again.

He kissed me hard as he continued to move inside me, his tongue meeting mine, and I pushed my hands into his hair and tightened my grip against his scalp. I needed this. Needed every part of him I could get. My mind might have been screaming at me that this was a bad idea, a stupid idea, the kind of idea that could get me into way more trouble than it was worth, but, as he fucked me there on the desk in the middle of the factory, I couldn’t have given less of a damn.

I was already starting to get close, all the tension that had built between us beginning to turn into something worthwhile. My legs were beginning to

tense, my thighs squeezing around him as I hooked my ankles around his back. I needed this. I needed this so badly it was like the rest of the world had ceased to exist, like we were the only thing that mattered. The place could have been on fire outside those doors and it wouldn't have mattered to me as he drove me closer and closer to the edge, closer and closer to the point of no return.

“Fuck,” I moaned against his mouth, and he sank his teeth into my bottom lip for a moment, the shock of pain translating to even more pleasure in my belly. I felt myself inching closer and closer to the edge, tipping toward the orgasm I needed so badly.

It hit me at last. My pussy clenching around his cock, the throbbing pleasure exploding to consume my whole body at once. Each and every nerve ending seemed to have lit up at the same second, my entire body alight with the pleasure of it, my whole body shaking as I clung to him for dear life. He continued to fuck me, moving in deep and hard, and a few moments later, I felt him reach his own release inside me.

He held himself there for a moment as we both came back down to Earth, hanging on to each other for dear life. I was breathing hard, and I could feel his breath against my neck, where he had leaned his head as he had reached his release, unable to hold back any longer. I didn't want him to. Even if either of us could have, I didn't want him to hold off on finally giving in to what we had needed since the second we had seen each other again.

But as the orgasm began to subside and as he pulled back from me, I felt reality creeping in around the corners of my mind once more. *Shit. Shit.* What the hell had I been thinking? What the hell was I doing? I should have known better. No matter what had happened between us, no matter what had gone down in the past, I should never have allowed myself to be vulnerable with him like this. Let him get close to me like this.

Before he could say a word, I was pulling my panties back into place, adjusting my skirt so I could hide the reality of what had just happened. I was still breathing hard, and no doubt my cheeks were flushed and pink, but I just had to hope nobody looked close enough to see that.

I needed to get out of here.

“Uh, I should get going,” I told him quickly before he could say anything to me. It wouldn't take much for him to be able to convince me that I should stick around just a little longer, and the last thing I needed right now was to let him get under my skin like that. I had to hold back. I had to keep him at

arm's length. There was a reason I had left him before, because I knew what we had would get in the way of my career, and the same thing would happen now, if I let him in. I wasn't going to allow it. I wasn't.

He hadn't even gotten his belt back on by the time I had grabbed my laptop and made a run for the door. My head was spinning, and my legs were still trembling from the intensity of the orgasm he'd just given me. Fuck. Fuck! What the hell was I doing? What the hell had I just done? What had I just allowed to happen?

I rushed down the corridor, keeping my eyes to the floor and hoping to God nobody tried to talk to me while I fled from this place. I would work from home for the rest of the day, anything to put some distance between myself and what had just happened here.

As soon as I made it outside to the bustling street beyond the factory, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes, doing everything I could to bring myself back down to Earth. It was okay. It would be anyway. I didn't know what the hell I had been thinking, but it was done now, behind me, and I could move on with my life. Maybe it was just a matter of getting it out of my system, right?

Or maybe whatever we had just shared was the beginning. And now that I had started it, there was no way I could roll back the passion that had always been there between us.

CHAPTER 15



JAX

I hung my hand out of the window, moving my fingers in the breeze rushing by the car as we drove.

When Max had first turned up at my house this morning, I had tried to brush him off, tell him I needed some time for myself, but he hadn't bought it for a second.

"Come on, you need to get out of the house," he had told me cheerfully. "It's Saturday. You don't want to spend the whole weekend sitting on your ass doing nothing, do you?"

I was sure there would have been no arguing with him, so I decided the best call was to just go along with his demands and hope this was over sooner rather than later.

Really, I knew he was right. I never did well with sitting around at home, stewing on whatever had been going on, and God only knew how much she was getting under my skin right now. Ever since our hookup the day before last, she had been the only thing on my mind. Morgan, Morgan, Morgan, like a song I couldn't get out of my head. Was this what she had wanted? Was this all part of some play she was pulling to try to get me to give in to how much I wanted her? I had no idea. But I knew that being with her again sexually had turned me on like nothing else had, and I was already addicted to the thought of doing it all over again.

She had run for it like her ass was on fire after we were done, and I couldn't say I blamed her. She must have known how much danger we were in, doing something like that at the office. And not even at either of our offices, for what it was worth. If we had been caught on camera, which I was sure we hadn't, we wouldn't have been able to pull the strings to get those

details wiped off the face of the Earth.

It was more risk than it was worth. And yet...

Max had invited me out fishing, and we were driving to this little marina on the outskirts of the city to take in the bright summer sun and relax. It had always been how Max kicked back, even though he wasn't that good at it. I teased him about that sometimes, but he would always just wave his hand and tell me I didn't get it.

"It's about enjoying the time you have there, not about how many fish you catch," he had protested to me once. I had grinned.

"Yeah, I guess that's what every fisherman who can't actually land anything says to themselves, right?" I teased him, and he had fired me a stony look.

Today, though, I was glad for the distraction. As we arrived at the marina, he unpacked his stuff from the trunk of the car and got us set up on a small, private pier so we could fish. I was never much good at it, but he'd brought along a couple of beers for us, and I knew what to do with those, at least.

As I sipped, letting the quiet sounds of the waves soothe me, Max glanced over at me.

"How are things going with the KICKS contract?" he asked. "You've been doing a lot of work on it, right?"

"Yeah, I've been busy with it," I replied, keeping my voice vague. I didn't even know why I was trying to brush him off here. We were twins, and he could always tell when something was up with me. Downside of having someone out there in the world who understood you that well, I guessed.

"And what about Morgan?" he asked. "The two of you had any issues?"

My mind flashed back to her on the desk, her legs wrapped around me, the way her eyes seemed to blur at the edges when she came. I couldn't help but smirk slightly as I shook my head.

"No, no issues," I replied. "We're getting on fine."

"Oh, yeah?" he replied, cocking his head at me curiously. "You were worried about it before."

"Yeah, turns out I was just being paranoid," I replied. "We get along fine now. Looks like we're not going to have any issues working with each other."

Max fell silent for a moment, not taking his eyes off of me. I kept my gaze fixed on the water in front of us, praying he wasn't going to register what was actually going on inside my head. The last thing I needed was for

him to see the truth, even if some part of me wanted to have someone to talk to about this chaos in my head. I knew I needed to get it off my chest, and I was sure my brother was the best person to do that with, the person who I could trust with the maddeningly confusing emotions I was handling right now.

“Something happened between you, didn’t it?” he asked quietly.

I stared straight ahead. This was it. The moment I had been waiting for, the moment where someone was going to call me out on my feelings for her. But I didn’t know if I was ready for it. I hesitated before I came out with anything, knowing there would be no way I could take any of this back once it was out there.

“Yes,” I admitted finally. “We hooked up a couple of days ago.”

“How were you even around each other?” he asked, shaking his head. “What was going on?”

“We were at the KICKS factory together.”

“Hold the fucking phone,” Max demanded, lifting his hand to stop me in my tracks. “You were at the factory? As in, the factory for the brand you’re trying to win right now?”

“Yes, that one.” I sighed. “They set aside this room for us both to work in, and we were just there together. I guess the tension got the better of us and we found a way to work it off.”

Max stared at me for a long moment, as though he couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You found a way to work it off,” he muttered, shaking his head, like he couldn’t wrap his head around it. “Are you serious? You could have been caught.”

“Yeah, but we weren’t.”

“And what if there were cameras?”

“There weren’t. They just set the room up for the two of us to work in,” I assured him. “There was nothing to it, really. No way anyone could have found out.”

“There better not have been,” he muttered, shaking his head. “Do you know how much trouble you would be in if something like this came out? How much trouble all of us would be in? Our reputation would be shot. Hell, we’re relying on you to represent us the way we need to be represented, not go hooking up with some college ex of yours when you should be working.”

I bristled when he called her that, though I knew I shouldn’t have been bothered by it. I didn’t like the thought of him just brushing her off in those

terms. She was more than that to me. She always had been, even when I should have known better, even when she had shattered my heart. Some part of me had always hoped we would find a way back to one another, even if this was the very bottom of the barrel of what I had hoped for those circumstances to be.

But he was right. She wasn't worth risking my career, his career, all of our careers over. If we were busted, it would ruin us, no doubt about it. Nobody would be able to take us seriously again, and it would be all my fault.

"I'm sorry," I muttered. It was the least he deserved for the way I had acted. I knew better than to let my desire get the better of me. I knew better than to allow myself to be drawn in by the promise of what had happened before. Just because we'd been good together once didn't mean it was going to happen again, right?

"It was just sex," I promised him. "And it's done now. We've gotten it out of our systems."

"Yeah, you better," he replied. "You need to stay focused on work."

I wished I could. Wished I could admit to Max what was really going on inside my head, how badly I wanted to get in touch with her again and invite her to my place so we could pick up right where the two of us had left off. Crazy? Probably, but it was hard to care when the memory of her lips against mine was still so fresh in my mind.

She drove me insane in all the best ways possible. And she knew it. She knew how she made me feel, and she wasn't afraid to use it. Was that all it had been between us? I couldn't help but wonder. She was savvy, smart, and not afraid to do what needed to be done when it came to business. It wouldn't have shocked me if this was an extension of that.

But could she have faked it so well? I knew from the way she looked at me she felt it too, whether she would have said it out loud. When she looked into my eyes, all those old feelings stirred. I had to have her. Make her mine. Make the world know she was my woman and nobody else was allowed to so much as look at her.

"You had your time with her, but it's over now," he reminded me, pulling me back into the moment, the present. I had to take him seriously. I knew he was right. Much as I wished I could just indulge myself in these emotions that I had pushed down for so long, I had to control myself, even if it felt impossible now we'd been with each other again.

“This is about work, right?” he continued as he tossed his line out into the water, letting it land with a small plop opposite us.

“Yeah, exactly,” I agreed. Maybe if I said it enough, I would start to believe it, too. I wasn’t sure if it worked like that, but I was willing to give it a try.

“You guys, whatever you had, it’s done now, even if you had a little throwback at the office the other day,” he continued, clearly trying to word it in the gentlest way he could. He was still my brother, even if he was pissed at me for putting things at risk the way I had, and he wasn’t about to go off on me as hard as he probably should have. He knew, after all, how deeply I had felt about her, how close I had been to spending my life with her before she had dumped me. It wasn’t simple between us. It never had been. And this particular little shift, bringing us together again in the line of work, was just yet another way it was going to get even more difficult.

“Don’t worry, you can trust me,” I told my brother. “I’m going to focus on the work from here on out. You have nothing to worry about. Whatever happened between us, it’s over now, okay? For good.”

“For good,” he repeated after me as though he was making certain I actually believed it. I stole a glance at him out of the corner of my eye. I could see his face was set, his mouth in a hard line, his annoyance at what I had done obvious.

But I just had to prove to him he could trust me, and we could put all of this behind us. Even if it was going to be rough to keep my feelings under wraps when it came to her, I knew I could do it. I needed to. The future of our company relied on it.

And there was no way in hell I was going to let them down now.

CHAPTER 16



MORGAN

“What do you think of these?” Haley exclaimed as she spotted the side tables sitting just inside the door of the thrift shop we had stepped into. The place was bustling with people, and I was glad for the distraction from what was going on in my head with Jax.

“Hmm,” I muttered as I took a step over to check them out. They were bright green with a lurid blue and aqua checkerboard pattern on the top. Without even having to ask, I knew she had set her heart on them, and the chances of me getting her to change it were next to nil.

“I love them,” she sighed as she ran her hand over the polished surface. “You think you can help me get them home?”

“How far is your new place again?” I asked her, frowning. We were out shopping for Haley’s new apartment, picking out all the furniture she was going to fill the place with, and she had already managed to find a couple of amazing pieces. Well, amazing to her. Our tastes certainly weren’t the same, but she loved them.

An emerald chaise-lounge, long scarlet curtains that would nearly graze the floor over her bedroom windows, a giant flowerpot decorated with the colors of the rainbow. The place would be packed to the brim with chaos in the best way possible, but I knew that was how she liked it.

“A couple of blocks,” she replied, smiling at me hopefully.

“Then sure, I can help you carry them back,” I promised her. The other thrift stores we had gone to had offered to drop off what she couldn’t carry later in the day, so we would have to be back there in time to meet them. Lugging these two tables across the couple of blocks to her place was going to be a pain in the ass, but I didn’t mind. She had tapped me for help, and I

always wanted to be there for her in any way I could.

She paid for the side tables as I leafed through some of the books on the shelf. Mostly old, dog-eared summer bestsellers, nothing too interesting. I put them back and hefted one of the side tables onto my shoulder while she tucked the other under her arm, a broad smile on her face.

“I think that’s nearly everything,” she told me, beaming happily. If there was one thing Haley loved to do, it was shop, and moving into her new place had given her the perfect opportunity to spend all of her cash at the local secondhand stores in her new neighborhood.

“You think?” I teased her lightly. She had picked up what felt like half the items we had seen, the giant bag on her back laden down with stacks of stuff. I didn’t know how she was able to fill her house with so much brightness. It would have given me a headache the moment I walked through the door, but all that mattered was that she liked it.

“Yeah, come on, let’s get home,” she told me. “I could use a glass of wine. I think we deserve one after how productive we’ve been, right?”

I agreed. I hadn’t spoken to her about what had happened with Jax yet, too worried about what she would think of me. Hell, too nervous that she was going to judge me for being so stupid as to fall into bed with someone I was meant to be well and truly done with. If I had any sense, I would have just forgotten about it, pushed it to the back of my mind and stayed focused on my work, but it felt nearly impossible when all I could think of was how good it had been to be with him again.

It had been turning over and over in my head, our encounter at the office, and I wondered if he was going through the same thing right now—thinking of me, thinking of us together, how good it had been. How much fun we’d had. How it had been like old times, even though those years were long past now. We weren’t together anymore, and we weren’t about to get together again, not a chance in hell. I knew better than to allow someone like him inside my head, inside my heart. Not when he could break it so easily and cost me this next stage of my career in the process.

We made our way back up the street to Haley’s place, and she chatted to me excitedly about the colors she was going to paint the walls, everything she was planning once she had a free weekend to get into it.

“It’s such a pain in the ass, though,” she sighed. “I don’t have hot water yet. The landlord still hasn’t hooked up my gas. I asked him, but he’s been too busy to get around to it.”

“Uh, what?” I replied, stopping dead in my tracks. “Are you serious? You’ve been there nearly a month, and he still hasn’t sorted all of that for you?”

“Yeah, I guess I should chase him down,” she replied, sounding a little sheepish. For as confident as she was when she was with me, there was a part of her that struggled with doing what needed to be done with everyone else, and sometimes, I wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her, tell her she needed to stand up for herself more.

“Yeah, you really need to,” I told her, frowning. “You can’t let him get away with that. He needs to take care of all of that for you. That’s his business. That’s what you’re paying him for, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” she replied, lowering her head down. She looked a little embarrassed, as though she was feeling silly for not being more assertive.

“Let me talk to him,” I offered. “I can get this sorted for you.”

“No, no, don’t worry about it, it’s fine,” she replied, waving a hand like she was dismissing the suggestion before it could take root. “I’ll handle it myself. You don’t have to get involved.”

“If you’re sure,” I replied. “But if this goes on for another week, you call me, and I can come around and make sure he knows what’s up, okay?”

“Thanks, Morgan,” she replied with a smile as we reached the door. One of the vans that was dropping off her new furniture had already pulled to a halt outside, and the driver was leaning up against the door, smoking a cigarette, and glancing at his watch.

We got the furniture unpacked and managed to work out a way to get the unwieldy velvet chaise-lounge up to her new place. It took a little pushing and shoving to get it to actually fit through the door, but we pulled it off, and we stood there, catching our breath for a moment, before her eyes widened.

“Oh, crap, we left the end tables out there?” she exclaimed, and she rushed for the stairs with me right behind her.

I followed her down to grab the tables and carry them up to her new place but in the stairwell, we ran into someone.

“Oh, hi, Jacob.” She greeted him nervously, looking down at her feet.

“How’s my new tenant settling in?” he asked her, stuffing his hands in his pockets as he grinned at her.

Oh, so this was the landlord? Yeah, he needed to get a piece of my mind. I knew she had asked me not to get into this for her, but I wasn’t going to stand by and let her go without gas when I knew she needed it.

“She’s having a hard time without her gas hooked up,” I told him, raising my eyebrows pointedly.

“Morgan, you don’t have to—” she began, but I had already decided to take it upon myself to do what I needed to do.

“It’s fine,” I replied, lifting a hand to stop her in her tracks. I knew she didn’t want me getting involved, but I was also distinctly aware of the fact that she was just going to let this go, and go, and go unless I did something to actually help her.

“Oh, that still hasn’t been sorted?” he asked her, frowning.

“No, it hasn’t, and she told me she talked to you about it,” I told him. “When do you think you’ll be able to take care of it?”

“Uh, I’ll get right to it,” he replied. “It’ll be sorted by the end of the week. Thank you for bringing it to my attention.”

“No problem,” I replied, and he made his way back off down the stairs, apologizing to Haley as he went.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she grumbled to me, but I knew she was relieved. She sometimes didn’t have the easiest time standing up for herself, especially when she felt like she was the only one having an issue, but that was what I was here for—to make sure she got everything she needed.

“How long were you going to put up with cold showers before you said anything?” I replied, shaking my head at her fondly.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “But they’re meant to be good for you, right? Cold showers?”

“Yeah, you can keep them,” I replied. “Now, what about that glass of wine?”

We made our way up to her place, all her new furniture piled next to the door. She insisted she was going to have no issues moving it around herself, though I wasn’t sure I believed it. She always liked to do what she could herself, no matter how many times I offered my assistance.

We sipped on a well-earned glass of white wine, and I looked around at her new purchases, a cluster of bright colors in the corner of the room.

“What do you think of them?” she asked me.

I laughed. “You know it’s not my style,” I told her as diplomatically as I could.

She giggled. “Just tell me you think I have terrible taste and go,” she teased me.

“Sure, you have terrible taste,” I told her. “That good enough for you?”

“At least you’re being honest,” she replied, lifting the glass to her lips.

Honestly, I wouldn’t have cared what furniture she chose to get for herself. Any distraction from what was going on inside my head was a welcome one right now.

Not that I was going to volunteer that information to her right now. No, better to keep it to myself and wait for it to fade away in my head. I knew it would just be a matter of time until it all slipped from my imagination, even if it was all so fresh now it seemed to press at the front of my mind.

“Something bugging you?” Haley asked, and I shook my head quickly.

“Just annoyed that your landlord thought he could get away with screwing you over like that,” I replied, changing the subject.

“Yeah, I’ll make sure to get you on him if he tries any of that again,” she replied. “You know how to kick his ass. I could never talk to him like that.”

“And that’s exactly why you were washing your dishes in cold water for the last few weeks,” I teased her.

She rolled her eyes. “Okay, okay, I get it. I’m too much of a pushover for my own good.” She laughed. “But that’s why I keep you around, isn’t it?”

“That, and so you don’t have to drink wine all by yourself,” I replied, flashing her a playful smile as I lifted the glass to my lips once more. I was beginning to relax now that I was far from the office, far from the memories of Jax and me together.

Even if I knew I was going to have to get back to work once this weekend was over.

CHAPTER 17



JAX

I carefully moved the illustration I'd gotten from the graphics department into position and leaned back to check it out.

I was trying to put together a logo for this campaign I was creating for KICKS, but everything I came up with looked not *wrong*, exactly, but not quite right, either. As though there was something missing, even if I couldn't put my finger on it.

Or maybe it was just the nagging in my mind, telling me there was something missing and it had everything to do with her and the fact she wasn't right there in front of me at this very moment.

Ever since she'd practically sprinted out of the office after our hookup, I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her. How could I? I wanted to be near her. I wanted to fuck her again. I wanted to kiss her, hold her, show her how badly I had missed her all this time, worse than I had ever realized myself.

But I was doing my best to keep what Max had said to me at the front of my mind about keeping my distance, about separating work and play. Because that was all it was, just a little play between us, and the sooner I clicked into that, the easier it was going to be for me to move on and forget about that tension. In a matter of weeks, one of us would have this KICKS contract, and we wouldn't be around each other any longer. When that time came, there was no way in hell I was going to let her run away with it, not because I was so distracted by what had gone down between us.

I moved back in close to the screen of my tablet, trying to work out what wasn't quite sitting right with me. Maybe I was just overthinking it. I couldn't tell. It would do me good to get another set of eyes on this, but I was in early enough that I was the only person in the main offices. I could have

gone down to the KICKS factory, of course, worked in the room they'd put aside for us, but I might have run into Morgan then, and I didn't know if I was ready for it yet. Didn't know where we stood or what was going on in her mind, either.

Before I could let my brain turn this over again, I heard a knock at the door and lifted my head just in time to see Derrick strolling in. He slid into the chair opposite me with his usual chilled-out fashion, his tie slightly askew. He never looked as though he was entirely suited to the office environment, but he was one of the sharpest minds here, and I would have trusted his take on things over almost anyone else.

"How's the KICKS stuff coming along?" he asked me. The whole team had been showing a lot of interest in the potential this contract had, and I didn't want to let them down, not that it was exactly helping my stress to think of how much this was going to sting if I did. I knew I had to win this, no matter what, no matter what Morgan tried doing to throw me off—I couldn't stand to lose, let alone to her, and the guys would never let me live it down if I lost this contract to a company like the one she was working for.

"Slowly but surely," I replied, and I turned the tablet around so he could see what I was working on. "What do you think of this? I feel like something's off, but I can't put my finger on it."

"I think it looks great," he replied, shaking his head. "You're overthinking it. Get out for a walk or something. Clear your head. It'll do you good."

"Yeah, you're probably right." I sighed, leaning back from the desk. I glanced up at Derrick and wondered if I should broach the topic of more personal matters with him. It probably wasn't the best idea, but maybe I wanted permission—or just someone to tell me I wasn't totally crazy for going after what I had gone after.

"Can I ask you something? No judgment?"

"I can't promise that part, but I can try," he replied. "What's up?"

"What's the policy on, you know, intimate relationships around the office?"

"What, you mean sex?" he asked me, and I nodded. "Now, look, I'm not saying we have to know everything about each other," he told me, cocking an eyebrow. "But this place is mostly guys since we recently brought Judy on in the accounting and marketing areas. Is there something you want to tell me?"

"No, no, nothing like that." I laughed. "Don't worry, I'm not crushing on

one of you. I guess I mean out of the office. When it comes to work. People we meet in a professional capacity. Do you think we have a responsibility to keep it professional, above everything else?”

“Why are you asking?”

I shrugged. “Let’s just say a friend wanted to find out.”

“A friend, huh?” he remarked as though he could see straight through me.

I wasn’t really trying to hide it. It didn’t bother me if he guessed. I just wanted to find someone to tell me I wasn’t totally crazy for feeling the desires I did for her. I knew it was wrong, knew he likely would have kicked my ass if he had found out there was really someone I had hooked up with, but still.

“Yeah, a friend.”

“Well, you can tell your friend that, as far as I’m concerned, it’s better to keep yourself to yourself when it comes to that kind of stuff,” he replied. “Stay on the safe side. Don’t mix business and pleasure. All of that.”

“Yeah, of course,” I replied, feeling my heart sink slightly. I knew he was right, but there had been a part of me wanting him to come out with something different.

“And if your friend needs to talk to someone about this—”

“I think he’ll be fine,” I replied quickly. I didn’t want to delve into it any further. I was sure I had already given away enough as it was, and the thought of having to spill the truth to him about the way all of this had been going for me made me more than a little uncomfortable.

“Well, if you insist,” he replied, and he rose to his feet again. “You need any help with the KICKS stuff? I can give you a hand if you like. I have an hour or so free before my next meeting.”

“Nah, I’m good,” I replied. “You’re right. I just need to get out for a walk or something, clear my mind.”

“For sure,” he agreed, and he paused for a moment before he turned to leave. I could tell there was so much more he wanted to ask me, and I wondered if he was trying to read my mind, figure out what I had going on in there, to guess who the woman I was talking about really happened to be, even though I would never have told him. Hell, I hadn’t even spoken to anyone here, besides Max, about Morgan. It had all just been a little too close to the bone, and they all knew me as a womanizer anyway. If Max hadn’t been there to see it all in person for himself, I doubted any of them would have believed that I was involved with someone as seriously as I had been

with her back in the day.

He headed out of the office, leaving me alone with my thoughts once more. Well, the one thought I had in my head right now, at least—the thought of Morgan, of how much I wanted to be with her again. I wished I could reach out to her and ask if the same things were going through her head, but even if they were, I was certain she would have denied it, done everything she could to pretend it wasn't happening the way I knew it was.

She couldn't have faked what we had together. There was just no way. The tension between us, the intensity, it was the same as it was all those years ago, and I knew she hadn't been faking it then.

Maybe I should have told her about the ring I'd purchased for her. The ring I still had in my drawer, hidden away, as though she might just walk back into my life so we could pick up where we had left off all those years before. She would never have agreed, not even then, but when I had purchased it, I had been living in this fantasy world where she might just agree to be with someone like me for the rest of her life.

I needed to get out of this office. Derrick was right. I wasn't going to get anything done stewing in my thoughts like this. I needed to get moving and get out of here.

Down to the KICKS factory. It made sense for me to work out of there, right? Made sense for me to take advantage of being close to the clients, being able to find out just what they were looking for. I could consult with them on some of these details, and it would help me in figuring out the exact approach that would work for them.

I packed up my stuff and did my very best not to let the reality of why I was doing this cross my mind. Because, in truth, I was hoping I was going to see Morgan. Hoping she would already be down there, and the two of us could what? Just talk? I knew I wouldn't have been satisfied settling for just a talk, but it would have been better than nothing, better than sitting around here and trying to make sense of the mess inside my mind.

Maybe seeing her in person would be the best way to clear that all up, even if it felt impossible for us to get through to each other right now. Whatever was going on, there were still walls up between us, and I wanted nothing more than to tear them down.

But I needed her to go along with it if there was a hope in hell of getting back to where we were—if there was the smallest chance she would even entertain the idea, of course. I didn't know what was going through her mind,

what was running through her head when it came to us, but I wasn't going to work it out by sitting around here and spending all my time pondering on it.

Not when she might have been waiting just across town for me to turn up.

CHAPTER 18



MORGAN

I leaned back from my desk and stretched my arms above my head, letting out a long sigh. Really, I should have been down at the factory to work today, but I was way too nervous about running into Jax again to step foot in that place.

I was sure he would have that cocky-ass expression on his face, telling me he had gotten me just where he wanted me—telling me he had won, even though I knew he was far from that.

I just didn't know where my head was at when it came to him, and I didn't want to give him the chance to burrow even further under my skin than he already had. It seemed dangerous.

And a little too exciting for me to resist.

Susan made her way over to my desk, a warm smile on her face.

“How are things coming along with the campaign?” she asked me brightly. She was excited, already practically married to the idea of us winning, and I was determined not to let her down. That said, she had been hovering around my desk pretty much every single chance she had gotten lately, and it was starting to distract me. I knew she didn't mean to get under my feet, but it was hard not to feel like she was keeping an eye on me to make sure I wasn't going to let them down. I hoped I wouldn't, but the more time she spent looking over my shoulder, the harder it became for me to believe it was just innocent checking in.

“Really well,” I told her, smiling up at her, hoping she would actually believe me this time. “I can show you what I've been working on at the end of the day, if you like. I have a few more pieces I want to put together before I finish up for the week.”

“Sure, of course,” she replied. “Anything you need help with?”

“I’ll let you know if there is,” I promised her. I hoped she would take the hint and give me some time to myself, but she leaned on the desk, showing no signs of going anywhere.

I had to make an executive decision. I couldn’t keep sitting around, letting her get in the way of what I needed to do, but she was my boss, so I couldn’t tell her to just leave me be, either. Best way to get away from this without having to annoy her or hurt her feelings was to find an excuse—and I had the perfect one.

“Actually, there’s a few things I need to speak to them about down at the factory,” I told her. “I’m going to head along there now.”

“Of course,” she replied, nodding.

I smiled, getting to my feet, and headed for the door, silently praying to anyone who might have been looking out for me up there that I wouldn’t run into Jax. No way would he have been down there again so soon after what we had done, right? He would have been trying to avoid me, too. Unless he wanted to see me again, pick up where we had left off? Oh, hell.

I made my way down there, doing all I could to still my overactive imagination. I was sure there was nothing for me to worry about, nothing I should have let bother me. What had happened between us had happened already. There was nothing I could do about it, but maybe I could push it down far enough that it didn’t bother me anymore. Didn’t bother him, either. My head was in all kinds of a mess, but I had sworn a long time ago not to let any man get in the way of the job I knew I needed to do.

Not even if it was him.

I arrived down at the factory and made my way straight to the room they had put aside for us. As soon as I opened the door and saw him sitting there, my heart sank.

I could have just turned around and walked right out before he had a chance to see me. That would have been the sensible thing to do, duck out before he could look up and see I was in the room with him again. But, as though he sensed me, his eyes darted up and his mouth curled into a smile when he saw me standing there.

“Morgan, hey,” he greeted me, leaning back in his seat, looking me up and down as though he couldn’t believe his luck. I could feel my cheeks getting hot and silently cursed myself for giving away my attraction to him like that. He was just so damn sexy to me, especially knowing what had

happened between us last time. Just because my mind could shut down all my attempts to justify getting close to him, it didn't mean my body could.

"Hi," I replied stiffly, and I took a seat opposite him. I could feel his eyes on me all the way around the room as he observed me, took me in. I shifted in my seat as I waited for my laptop to boot up, willing it to go faster so I could get to work and keep my mind off of him as best I could.

I tapped my fingers on the table nervously and looked up at him. He was still staring at me. I knew what was on his mind. I could tell from the look on his face. I pressed my lips together with irritation.

"Something bugging you?" he asked me, as though he didn't know it was him.

"We need to talk about what happened," I fired back to him bluntly. If he thought I was going to dance around it, not say it out loud, he had another thing coming.

"Oh, do we?" he replied. "Thought you were just trying to avoid the subject."

"I know we did what we did," I continued, tilting my screen down so I could look at him properly. "But that doesn't mean we have to let it happen again," I told him firmly. "We should never have let our—whatever it is between us—get the better of us. We both know better than that."

"Do we?" he replied. "Because you didn't seem to when we—"

"This is me telling you that this can't happen again, for both of our sakes," I told him, and I tried to fill my voice with all the certainty I would need to convince him I meant this. I didn't want him finding some way to undercut me, not when I was teetering on the brink of jumping his bones right then and there. I needed to control myself, and I needed him to do the same. It was the only way this was going to be able to work.

"You're right," he replied finally, catching me off guard. The last thing I expected was for him to agree with me. I had expected him to keep fighting, keep arguing, keep teasing me until I couldn't resist and just had to have him again. I nodded.

Even though there was a part of me that was a little sad he had given me up so easily.

"We can't do it again, let alone here," he continued, gesturing around. "If we get caught, it would be both of our asses on the line. And I like yours way too much to let that happen."

That last part seemed to slip out before he could stop it. I couldn't tell if it

was meant flirtatiously or if there was something else going on inside his head he didn't want to admit to—something more serious, something born from real emotions.

It didn't matter. Either way, we had decided to call this to a halt, and it was for the best for both of us.

“Glad we got that cleared up,” I replied, and he stuck his hand across the table to me.

“Friends?” he asked, and I took it.

“I wouldn't go that far,” I joked. “But professionals, working in the same office for the next few weeks. Okay?”

“Sure thing,” he replied, and he sank back into his seat and continued his work where he had left off.

I tried to do the same as my laptop sprang to life in front of me, but instead, I found myself distracted.

Hadn't he enjoyed what we had done the other day? He seemed pretty happy to just give up on ever doing it again. Maybe he'd decided it was a mistake before I had even made it out of the office. Yes, it was a mistake, but I guessed some part of me had hoped he was going to fight a little more for it? Even though I had been the one to broach the subject of shutting it down, I had thought he would—

Shit, I didn't know. I tried to concentrate on the screen in front of me, but my mind was wandering in a million different directions at once as I tried to work out what was going on in my head. I was acting crazy—I was sure of that much—and I never liked the feeling of being out of control, never liked the sensation of not being able to choose how all of this unfolded.

Maybe that was what this was, just the sensation that he had made the call and not me. Even though I had wanted this, even though I knew it made sense for us to just leave this mistake behind and forget it had happened in the first place.

That was all it was, a mistake. An incredibly hot mistake that was already burned into my brain. I stole glances at him above the screen, wondering if he would be looking at me, but he didn't pay me any attention. It irritated me for some reason. Was it so easy to just forget what had happened only a few days before? So easy to forget what it was like being with me?

I couldn't work here. Shit, it was more distracting than being at the office with Susan hovering around me. Better that than to be wondering what was happening inside his head, why he was so happy to let go of what had

happened. I felt like I was going crazy.

I closed my laptop and got to my feet, stuffing it back into my bag so I could get out of there before my brain twisted up into any more of a mess. He glanced up at me, seemingly surprised I was out of there in such a rush.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“I need to get back to my office,” I replied, and I turned on my heel before he could come out with anything else. I was sure he had a smart comment at the tip of his tongue, but I didn’t feel like entertaining it, not now, not with the mess running around my mind in that instant.

I headed for the door before he could get another word out, and, as soon as I was outside, I gulped in a big breath of fresh air. There had been something oppressive about the atmosphere in there, as though a weight was pressing down on my shoulders—the weight of what had happened between us, maybe, the weight of knowing it wouldn’t happen again.

But I had wanted it that way. Hadn’t I? I had wanted to keep my distance from him. I had wanted us to stay away from each other. I had broken up with him all those years ago because I had known there was no way I could balance being with him and having the job that I wanted, and none of that had changed.

I had to keep my eyes on the prize. I couldn’t let him get to me or throw me off my game. I had made a promise to Susan and, more importantly, to myself that I was going to win the KICKS contract, once and for all, one way or another. He was the only thing in the way of that, and no way would I let him beat me out. I was sure he wanted to beat me to prove a point about how much better he was than me, but I didn’t back down so easily. I wasn’t going to let him win.

As I made my way back to the office, my head full of the kind of mess I wasn’t sure I would be able to sort through, I kept that thought in my mind. No matter what, I wasn’t going to let him win this.

CHAPTER 19



JAX

I lingered outside her office as I waited for her to come out. I was sure she was just going to turn around and tell me to get the hell out of there, but honestly, I could handle whatever she threw at me. I just wanted to talk to her. I knew it was the only way the two of us were going to be able to clear the air, and I wanted to make sure neither of us were hanging on to anything we shouldn't have been, anything that might have gotten in the way of us doing our jobs.

I had thought about going after her when she had stormed out, but I had figured she needed some time to cool off. I knew where she worked—I'd looked into the business she had been working for when I had been scoping her out the first time we'd come into contact with each other—and, as she emerged from the building for lunch, she looked up at me in shock.

"Jax, what the hell are you doing here?" she demanded, shaking her head.

"I wanted to talk to you," I told her. "I think we need to clear the air. How about Angie's? It's not far from here."

She started with surprise when she heard me say that name. I knew it wasn't what she had been expecting from me, not at all, not after everything that had happened—not after all the years that had passed. Maybe she thought I would have forgotten about that place, left it buried somewhere deep in my memories, but there was no way I would ever have been able to do something like that. Not when it was her. Not when every part of me was still as drawn to her as I had ever been, my memories closer to the surface than I'd ever felt before.

"Uh, sure," she replied, the words seeming to escape her lips before she could stop herself. "I guess we could. I'm not doing anything else for lunch."

It was like she was trying to reason with herself right then and there, tell herself why there was nothing wrong with going with me right now, like she needed all the excuses she could get. I wasn't going to point that out. As long as she was willing to go with me, I would accept it. I just wanted to be alone with her, even just for as long as her lunch break lasted.

We headed down the sidewalk away from her office, and I could feel her stealing glances at me out of the corner of her eye. Probably wondering what I was doing here, what my game was with all of this. I couldn't say I blamed her. The two of us, we had so much history, and there was so damn much wrapped up in the present, too, it wasn't as though we could just switch it off, like none of it had even mattered in the first place.

Arriving outside the small diner where we used to go for lunch together, I noticed her smiling, like she was being pulled back into all the memories she had used to treasure of us there.

"God, it's been so long since I came to this place," she remarked, shaking her head. "Shit, it feels like another lifetime."

I opened the door for her, and she stepped inside. The two of us had done so much here, celebrated so many wins, commiserated so many losses. I hadn't set foot in the place since the two of us had split up. I just couldn't handle it—no way did I want to bring up the painful memories of what our lives had been like before she had decided she needed to jettison me from her world completely.

She took a seat at our usual booth. In fact, she made her way over to it as though she was moving on autopilot. The thought of it made me smile. Even now, even after all this time, the memories were burned into her brain, the memories of all we had done here, everything we had shared in this place.

"Do you think they still do those strawberry smoothies?" she asked as I took my seat opposite her.

I shrugged. "No idea."

"I used to love those things." She sighed. "Even though they were pretty much pure sugar. You'd always give me the cherry from the top, remember?"

I nodded, smiling. She smiled back at me, her eyes a little hazy with nostalgia, and I almost wanted to ask her what else this place was bringing up for her—what other memories, what other parts of our distant past.

But that wasn't what I was here to talk about. I was here because I wanted to talk to her about the present, the future, and exactly how we were going to handle everything going forward.

We ordered some food and water, and she sipped from her glass as she peered around the place, as though it was sparking so many little memories and emotions she had forgotten about for so long.

“I still have no idea how Max fit into these booths,” she remarked, nodding to the spot beside me.

“He was always the worst for third-wheeling,” I agreed. “I think he just wanted the company, even if he could barely fit in the seats.”

She grinned at the memory, eyes distant. It was almost as though we were back there right now, the sound of our laughter filling this place before one of us darted off for a class or had to go hand in a paper or something. She was right. It really did seem as though all of that came from a different life, a different world entirely. Did she miss it? Did she wish she could go back there the same way I did? I had no idea, and I was sure she wouldn’t appreciate me asking.

“I remember that time I came here right after I went shopping,” she remarked. “When I had picked up that denim skirt, remember?”

“Oh, yeah. I remember the denim skirt,” I replied, cocking an eyebrow playfully. Of course I remembered that thing—the way it had hugged her ass, shown off those long, luscious legs. I would never have been able to forget it.

Her cheeks turned slightly pink, and she looked down at her glass once more, then swiftly shifted the topic to something a little less dangerous.

“So what did you want to talk to me about?” she asked me, biting her lip slightly when she was done. It was as though she was genuinely nervous about what I might have to say, like I was going to try and shut down her bid and steal all of this from her on the spot. As though I would ever have done something like that—as though I ever could have hurt her that way, even if I wanted to.

“I wanted to talk about the contract,” I explained. “I know you want it. Badly. And I know you’re going to do everything you can to fight for it, and trust me, I’m not stupid enough to think you’re going to let anything get past you.”

“Yeah, of course,” she replied as though it should have been obvious. “But what about—I mean, why would you bring me here? Of all places?”

She blurted it out before she could stop herself, and it was almost like she was annoyed that she had let it slip. She pressed her lips together, wishing she could take it back.

“Because I liked being here with you when I was younger,” I explained.

“And I figured I would like being with you here now.”

“And do you?” she asked. As though I would ever have said anything else—as though I would ever have even tried to cover up the truth of how I felt.

“Yes, I do,” I admitted. I loved being around her again. No matter how much I tried to ignore the feelings I had for her, I couldn’t. When I sat opposite her, even after all this time, in this place we used to waste so many days in together, all of it was as fresh as it had been back then.

She smiled softly, and I was sure it was her way of telling me she felt the same way about me, too. Even if she wouldn’t have said it out loud, I knew she could feel it.

“But this project is going to be over soon, and when it is, I know we’re not going to be seeing much more of each other,” I continued.

Her lips tightened slightly. “Yeah, of course,” she replied. “I know that.”

It stung me to hear her say it out loud, and the look on her face told me she felt the same way. She might never have admitted how she felt about me, but I knew her well enough that she didn’t have to.

“I know this is temporary, but I’ve enjoyed seeing you again, Morgan,” I told her softly. “I’ve enjoyed seeing how far you’ve come. How much you’ve achieved. I always knew you would go far, and seeing that I was right?”

“Yeah, you never did like being wrong, did you?” she replied with a playful smile on her face.

I chuckled. “No, I never did. And I knew I wasn’t wrong about you. You were always destined for great things.”

“Thank you,” she murmured. “For what it’s worth, I’ve enjoyed seeing you again, too.”

Her voice was taut as she spoke, and she slid her eyes away from mine, as though she couldn’t risk meeting my gaze when she said that. But I didn’t care. As long as she was willing to say it to me, as long as she was willing to tell me she felt the things I did, I would take it any way I could get it.

“Let me see if they still do that strawberry shake,” I suggested, and I headed over to the counter. I was looking away from her because I was sure she would be able to tell how much I wanted this to go on, how much I wanted to keep this thing between us going just a little longer, though I probably should have known better.

I leaned on the counter, and I was sure I could feel her looking at me. I felt a pang in my chest. No matter what, we needed to end this when the project was over and done with. Both of us had moved on with our lives, and

it would have been too complicated to open up what we'd had once more.

At the same time, if I could have found some way to keep this alive just a little longer, I would have done anything to take it

CHAPTER 20



MORGAN

I heard the knock on the door and double-checked the pot to make sure it wasn't going to start sticking while I answered it. I made my way to the entrance of my apartment and opened it to see Haley on the other side.

"Hey, there you are," she remarked happily as she leaned over the threshold to give me a warm hug.

I pressed my face into her shoulder and smiled, glad for the company. I had invited her over for dinner this Saturday to get my mind off work and off Jax. It was only a few days till we had to turn in our final pitches, and I was dealing with a chaotic mix of emotions. A bottle of wine and a good talk with Haley would help me get my mind off of it.

"What are you cooking here? Smells amazing," Haley called through to me as she made her way to my kitchen and started rummaging around for wine glasses. She'd come over here a million times before, and there was something comforting about how she treated the place like her own home. It made me feel like she was more family than just a friend.

"Some curry," I replied as I headed back to my spot at the stove and stirred the pot. "Nearly done, actually. I just need to grab the naan bread out of the oven, and I think we'll be ready to go."

"Does white wine go with a curry?" she asked, pulling a face. "I've never been any good at this food-matching stuff."

"It goes with anything, if you have enough of it," I replied.

The two of us served up and headed to the kitchen. She knew what was on my mind at once, and she pointed her fork at me and narrowed her eyes.

"So," she remarked. "What's going on with you and this trial contract? You must be coming up on your submission date, right?"

“It’s next week,” I replied with a sigh. “I’m super nervous about it.”

“Why?” she asked. “You’ve totally nailed it. I know you have. Can I see what you’ve got?”

I pulled out my phone and let her scroll through the small pitch I had put together. It covered exactly how I would go about promoting the new sneakers, along with potential celebrity partners we could work with on this and a planned social media campaign that would blow them up in the Gen-Z sphere.

Haley shook her head as she looked over it. “I don’t know how you come up with this stuff, Morgan, but it’s brilliant,” she told me as she handed my phone back to me. “Why are you nervous? You’re going to kick the ass of anyone who even tries to get in your way.”

“I hope so,” I muttered. “I really need this contract. I feel like, if I don’t get it, nobody’s going to look at me the same way again.”

“It’s not like you to be that worried about something like this,” she remarked bluntly. “Is something else going on?”

I didn’t reply. Of course, there was. It was Jax. He had gotten himself into my head and I felt like I didn’t have a chance of shaking him loose, not with everything going on. I wanted to be able to forget about him, but he had taken me out for lunch earlier in the week, to the place we used to go when we were dating, and the memories had been stirred up again. The memories of how much I loved to be with him, how much fun we used to have together. How safe he made me feel, like I was the only person in the world he could see.

But he was right. It wasn’t going to be long until it was over. Until what we had was closed off for good. I knew I couldn’t let myself get attached to having him around, but I was starting to crave time with him, which I knew was dangerous. I had been avoiding the office at KICKS all week, knowing I would run into him and knowing I couldn’t handle it.

“Yeah, there is,” I admitted finally. I knew there was no point in trying to hide it from her. She knew me way too well for that, even if I was starting to wish she didn’t seem to have the inside track straight into my brain.

“Jax?”

I nodded.

“What’s going on with the two of you?” she asked, frowning. “You seem really hung up on this guy. I don’t think I’ve seen you like this with anyone in all the time that I’ve known you.”

“Yeah, I know. He’s just—we have a history together,” I said. I was trying to justify it to myself as much as I was to her, trying to justify the intensity of how I felt about him with the memories of our past, even though I had been the one to walk away from him in the first place.

“But it doesn’t matter,” I continued, shaking my head. “The contract’s going to be decided in a few days’ time, and then we’re going to be out of each other’s lives for good. No need to get hung up on it.”

“You don’t have to do it like that, you know,” she pointed out. “You could just give him a call when all of this is over. See if he’s up for meeting again or something.”

I shook my head. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

I took a bite of my food, and the silence hung between us. She knew there was more to it than that.

She sipped on her wine and leaned back in her seat. “And why not?” she asked, grinning at me. “You clearly still have feelings for him. Why don’t you do something about them? I mean, not like you don’t know he’s into you. The two of you full-on dated before.”

“Yeah, but that was *before*,” I protested. “It’s not like we can just pick up where we left off. We don’t even know each other now, not really.”

It wasn’t true. Even after all this time, all these years apart, when he looked at me, I could tell that he saw into me the same way he had before. He saw right into those parts of me that I did everything to hide from everyone else, those parts of me that seemed too dangerous to let anyone else get a look at. But I didn’t feel exposed, knowing he could see them. I just felt seen. As though he could make out every detail about who I was but didn’t want to back off. He still wanted me.

Even after everything I’d done to him.

“It’s just a coincidence that we’re working together again,” I continued, waving a hand. “And we’re both going to be moving on soon. When it’s over, we’re not going to want to get in each other’s way. I know he’s got a life of his own. I don’t want to cause him any trouble with that.”

“And who says you would be causing him trouble?” she replied. “Maybe he wants to see more of you. Maybe he’d like to get to know you better.”

“Yeah, well, it’s not a good idea,” I told her, shaking my head. “We had closure on what happened between us before. I don’t want to rip off that band-aid again. It wouldn’t be fair to either of us, and besides, when I get this contract, it’s not like I’m going to have much time for dating, is it?”

“When you get it?” she remarked. “You sound confident.”

“Of course I am,” I said, trying to bring forth some of that cockiness I knew had served me so well over the years. I didn’t plan to let it slide just because I was up against him to get this job. I still wanted to make sure I did everything I could to land it, but the thought of taking it from him didn’t exactly make me happy.

I didn’t want to hurt him by taking this contract from him, and I couldn’t help but feel that was what I was going to do if I won. But if I lost, what if it turned out all of this had just been a game to him, a way for him to prove to himself he had officially won our break-up?

I knew I had hurt him before, and I would have wanted revenge if he had done to me what I had done to him. The pain I must have hit him with hadn’t been fair, and if I could have gone back in time to undo it, maybe I would have.

Maybe I shouldn’t have behaved that way. How different would my life have been if I had just decided to stay with him? The two of us still shared that chemistry, and maybe we would have found some way to make it stick if I had just stayed around long enough to try and work it out. Yeah, it might not have been easy, but sometimes, the hard stuff was the part worth fighting for.

“You know I’ll support you no matter how you decide you want to handle this,” Haley said.

I nodded and smiled back at her. If it wasn’t for her, I didn’t know how I would have been able to keep a sane mind with everything that was going on. She was the one sensible voice who seemed to be able to cut through all the nonsense I had around him in my head, the one person who could actually straighten all of this out.

“I know, thanks,” I murmured. “If we do it like this, then we can both move forward. Otherwise, we’d just be turning around and going back to the start, and I know he doesn’t want that any more than I do.”

“Right, of course,” she agreed.

The words sounded rational as they came out of my mouth, but my gut was screaming at me to take them back, to tell her I didn’t really believe any of that and I wanted to see him right now. I wanted to be with him. I wanted to show him how much I had missed him and how badly I longed for him.

We finished up our meal, and I shifted the subject from him. I just couldn’t stand going over it all again, the stress of running through what I had

been trying so hard to leave behind. It was too painful, the thought of him too sharp in my mind for me to risk letting him stay.

Haley gave me a hug before she left, as though she could tell what was going on inside my head.

“If you need to talk, you just give me a call, okay?” she told me.

I nodded. I could have talked it out with her for hours, but I knew my mind was still going to land in the same place—wishing he was here, wishing he was close to me, wishing we could pick up right where we had left off.

“I will,” I lied to her, and I watched her head down the corridor before I closed the door, leaned up against it, and let out a sigh. Closing my eyes, I tried to pull myself together. I needed to stop acting like such an idiot. I had a job to do and I needed to remember that.

While it was tempting to let my feelings get the better of me, that was the very reason I had split with him in the first place—because I knew I couldn’t handle the intensity of the way I felt about him and my career at the same time.

It was better this way, better for both of us, and I needed to keep that at the front of my mind. No matter how tempting it might have been to just fall into bed with him again, I wasn’t that girl anymore. I was a grown-ass woman with a grown-ass career and no matter how much I wanted him right now, I didn’t have to give in to it.

CHAPTER 21



JAX

My eyes started to blur as I stared at the screen for what felt like the twentieth straight hour in a row. I got to my feet, closed my laptop, and stretched. I needed some new eyes on this project, and Max was the man for the job.

I had been trying to keep myself busy this whole weekend, to stay focused on the project, which was due on Monday. I had no idea how this was going to go or how Morgan's work was going to stack up against mine. I hadn't gotten any idea what she was going to turn in, and I wished I had some clue what I was going to be up against.

I could have just called her up and asked her directly, but I knew she would brush me off. This was too important for her to give me an inch. And maybe I was just looking for some other way to get in a room alone with her because I hadn't been able to stop thinking about her for the last few days straight.

I packed up my stuff and headed over to Max's place, where he and Judy were having brunch. I was glad for someone else's perspective, too, as Judy looked over Max's shoulder to see what I had put together. I could tell Max was a little irritated at being interrupted in the middle of his relaxing weekend routine, but this was more important than their poached eggs and cocktails.

"It's looking good, Jax," Max said.

Judy nodded as she took her place on the couch next to him. "Yeah, I don't know a ton about this stuff, but I like it. It would get me looking at the shoe, for sure."

"That's perfect." I took my laptop back from Max but I wasn't ready to leave yet. I wanted to have the company, even if it was just my brother and

his girlfriend. Someone had to get me out of my head.

“You want a drink?” Judy asked as though she could tell what was on my mind. Max might have wanted me out of there, but clearly his girlfriend could tell there was something happening.

“Yeah, a drink would be great,” I agreed.

She headed through to the kitchen to make me one. Max eyed me, looking me up and down, as though he could tell what was bothering me.

“What about Morgan?” he asked.

“What about her?” I replied, playing dumb.

“Have the two of you seen each other again?”

“Yes,” I replied, and when he parted his lips to complain, I lifted a hand to stop him. “In a strictly professional setting. Nothing more than that. Don’t worry, I think we’re both clear where we stand now.”

“You better be,” he muttered, shaking his head, and then he softened slightly. “And how are you, you know, feeling about it all?”

“Damn, Max, are you asking about my feelings?” I teased lightly. “That’s how I know it’s serious.”

“I just want to know you’re okay,” he said. “I know she did a number on you. I don’t want that happening again.”

“You’re talking about Morgan?” Judy asked as she returned with my Bellini.

I shot Max a look. “You told her?”

He shrugged. He didn’t keep much from her now, I guessed. Maybe it shouldn’t have surprised me she had already had the run-down on what had happened between Morgan and me, even if I would have preferred to keep it to myself.

“Yeah, we are,” I admitted. I could use another perspective on it. Max was clouded by the memories of what had happened when Morgan and I had been together back in the day, but she was coming at it totally untouched by all of that. I needed someone who was going to be able to cut through all the bullshit and make sure I didn’t get caught up in what had happened before.

“How do you fancy your chances of beating her?” She slipped a hand onto Max’s shoulder, the two of them leaning up against each other.

I had to admit I was a little envious of my brother and how happy he clearly was with Judy. The two of us had been single for a while, and knowing he had found the woman he wanted to be with for the rest of his life made me long for the same thing myself.

Though I didn't think I would have to go looking far to find her.

"I have no idea what she's putting in, so it's pretty much fifty-fifty," I replied. "She's good at her job. I know she's going to do everything she can to take me down. I just have to be ready to beat her, I guess."

"And you think you are?"

"As ready as I'll ever be," I told her, lifting the glass to my lips. I had been drinking a little more than usual lately, and I knew I should get a better handle on it. But I just wanted to help myself get away from the memories of her, from the memories of the woman I just couldn't seem to shake from my mind.

"You just have to put it in and see how it goes. Let them decide," she tried to assure me. Judy might not have known me super well, but Max had clearly told her enough for her to be able to figure out what was bothering me.

"Yeah, I know," I agreed. "I just..." I trailed off. I didn't want to say what was really on my mind. That, when this was over, I would have no reason to see her again.

"I don't want to take anything from her, that's all," I admitted finally.

Max shook his head. "You can't think of it like that. You know you can't. You're both working your asses off, and whoever wins, wins. It's not like you've done anything underhanded to get what you want. And if she wins it, it's because she deserved it. Same with you."

I nodded. He was right. It was my job, after all, to be able to stand up and fight for what this company needed. I couldn't look at it as though I was stealing something from her, but it still felt as though I would have been taking something she wanted, and I needed her to have everything she wanted. It was a hangover from when we had been dating, when I had wanted her to have the whole world, when I had wanted to be the one to give it to her.

It was no different now, even though we were at odds with each other and I should have been willing to fight for my business to win the contract I wanted so badly. I had looked over the pitch a million times, trying to work out if there was some part I had half-assed, some flaw I had left for her to exploit. If she saw that weakness, she would pounce on it.

But she had asked me to back off the competition. She had told me to drop out so she would have a chance at taking it. I had never imagined her as that kind of person, the kind who would plead for reprieve. She had always

been stronger than that. Or maybe she just knew I was the only person out there who would have considered doing it for her—the only person she could actually connect with on a deep enough level to convince me to hand this to her.

I had no idea, and my head was a mess. Nothing made any more sense than the first time I had thought of it.

“You know, it’s going to be over soon,” Judy said. “You could always call her up after that, ask her out for dinner or something. I bet that’s what she’s waiting for. That’s what I’d want, if I were in her position.”

I shook my head. It wouldn’t be fair to do that to her, not after all we had been through already. Things were confusing enough without trying to pick up where we had left off with our relationship, and I had no doubt she just wanted to forget any of it had happened at all.

“I don’t think so,” I replied. “It’s in our past now, everything that happened. I don’t want to stir it all up again.”

“Exactly,” Max agreed.

I was glad he could see this was the sensible choice, even if I wished I could go back and undo it all. Maybe Judy was right, and the best way I could go about this was to ask her out to dinner and see where it took us. It wouldn’t hurt, right? Just getting to know her again, this new version of her?

I knew it was just a fantasy, nothing more than that.

“She wanted to make a career for herself,” I said. “That’s why she split up with me in the first place. She’s not going to change her mind on all of that now, not after all this time.”

“You don’t know that for sure,” Judy replied, raising her eyebrows. “A lot can change in a few years.”

She didn’t know how shattered I had been when Morgan had broken up with me. She had left me, abandoned me, and chosen her career over me, and I felt like I would never be able to forget that. No matter what happened between us next, I would always have one foot out the door, fearful she was going to do it all over again.

I needed to get my head out of my ass. When we had been out for lunch together, it had felt bittersweet, stirring up everything that had happened between us in the past. We couldn’t bring those feelings into the present. We both knew it was too dangerous and too painful for both of us to go delving back into what had been over for so many years. No way was I going to do that to myself or to her.

“I should get back to my place and put the finishing touches on the pitch,” I said. I didn’t want Judy to talk to me any more about what I should be doing with Morgan. I was too worried she might be right, and I hated the thought of being torn between what I wanted and what I knew I should accept as the truth.

“You can stay for some brunch if you want,” Max began, but I finished up my drink and shook my head.

“I’m good, thanks,” I replied. “I’ll see you later.”

With that, I made my way out of his house before either of them could say anything else. I had to finish up this proposal and get it ready for submission but really I couldn’t have hidden the truth of what was going around my head and I didn’t want to be interrogated about it any more than I already had. Maybe it was selfish, but I wanted to be alone right now.

Alone was where I could just think about her and the final meeting I was sure we were going to have when we submitted our contracts next week.

CHAPTER 22



MORGAN

I straightened my jacket and smoothed my hair back, my bob swinging against my chin. It was starting to get a little overgrown, and I needed to get it trimmed soon.

I had been too busy with this job to think about anything else, and I couldn't wait to see where today was going to take me. Even if I was so nervous that I felt like I might throw up.

It was happening. Today was the day I was going to turn in the project I had put together for KICKS and find out whether I had gotten the job. Maybe it would take a little longer than a few hours for them to decide, but I hoped mine was so far and away out in front that it wasn't even a debate. A girl could dream, right?

I was nervous about seeing him, too. I didn't know if he would be at the KICKS factory at the same time as me, but I had no doubt he would turn up first thing in the morning like I was planning to. He knew what he was doing, just the same way I did, and our minds worked in comparable ways.

It was one of the reasons we had always gotten along so well. He always seemed to get what was going on in my head. I had no doubt he was as nervous as me today, though he would never have admitted it. He always wanted the world to think he was the most confident, the most certain, the most sure of himself, and even more so on a day like this when he was coming up against someone who might get in his way.

I decided to walk down to the KICKS factory, making certain I had every little detail of the pitch straight to hand over to them. I was freaking out just a little bit, but I wasn't going to let anyone see it. I had worked hard on this pitch, and I knew everything was perfect. Now, the most important thing was

handing it over, finishing this up, and hoping for the best. And maybe having an extra-large glass of wine tonight to take the edge off of things.

By the time I arrived at the factory, my hands were shaking, but I smiled at the receptionist, hoping she couldn't tell how much I felt like I was going to lose it at any second.

"If you'd like to wait in the meeting room, they'll be in to talk to you soon," she told me, gesturing for me to head off down the hall.

I nodded and headed to the meeting room on my shaky legs. I didn't bother asking her if there was anyone else there because I was sure I already knew the answer.

Sure enough, when I opened the door, there he was. Jax.

He was sitting in a sharp suit, legs crossed, arm draped along the back of the seat. The only sign he was nervous at all was the drumming of his fingers on the chair back, though he was doing all he could to make sure he didn't give that away.

When he saw me, he smiled. "Hey, Morgan."

I loved hearing him say my name. There was something peaceful about it, something grounding, as though everything else in the world just ceased to be for as long as it took for the words to sink into my ears.

"Hey," I replied, and I took a seat next to him, not so close as to make it look like I was trying to get near to him, but I wanted to be. I could smell his aftershave from here, something deep and woodsy, and I wished I could just bury my face in his neck and breathe it all in.

"You here to drop off your campaign?" I asked, and I winced at how obvious the question was. Why the hell else would he have been here?

Instead of jumping on it to tease me, he nodded. "Yeah, you?"

"Same," I replied, shifting nervously in my seat. "I'm worried about it, honestly."

"You've got nothing to be worried about," he assured me kindly. "You're good at this. They wouldn't have let you get this far if you weren't."

"Thanks, Jax," I murmured. I appreciated the vote of confidence. "Good luck."

I hoped I could come across a little more certain of myself, though it didn't matter much. I could let my guard down now. We were both here on even footing, handing over what we had been working on. Nobody could take anything we said to each other here and use it for their own benefit. We were just talking now, not trying to win out against each other, not trying to do

anything but give each other a little comfort in the face of everything we were doing.

It was huge, probably the biggest opportunity I'd had in my whole career. And there was something that felt right to me about having him here with me. Even though we had been split up for so long, I enjoyed his company, and I felt like he was here to support me, putting his trust and support in me like he had done all those years ago. When I had needed him, relied on him, and then turned my back on him when things had gotten too tough. When I had decided he was a distraction from what I really wanted to do with my life.

My head was scrambled as we sat there next to each other. I could feel the heat coming off him in waves, and there was a major part of me that just wanted to lean over and lean my head on his shoulder, to take comfort in how nice it was to be in his presence once more. No doubt he would brush me off, given we were meant to be in the midst of a professional setting, but it hadn't put him off before.

I wasn't going to start thinking about that when I was trying to keep my focus on the task at hand. It might not have been easy, being this close to him without being able to do anything about it, but I could handle it. I was just a few minutes away from handing in my proposal, and I couldn't wait to see what they made of the project I had ready to put forward.

I twisted my hands in my lap, fighting the urge to open up the file I had brought with me and check everything was in order. It would be, and I would just mess up that carefully cultivated order if I tried to do anything to change it. I would be better off just leaving it be. Then I could hand it over to them in the perfection I had planned to deliver it in.

I couldn't believe this was it. After everything that had happened, everything that had gone down between the two of us, we were closing in on the end, and soon, it would all be over. I could still remember the shock when I had run into him at the conference, the anger and irritation I'd felt when he had cut in front of me the way he had to make his pitch to them. He was still as utterly cocky as he had been before, and even though it should have pissed me the hell off, there was still a part of me that was drawn to his ego.

Suddenly, the door opened, and one of the KICKS partners, Ian, stepped inside. He rolled his shoulders back and smiled at us. He looked as nervous as I felt, and I wondered how he could be so worried. Maybe he was concerned there was going to be blowback from whoever he turned down. Or maybe he was just nervous about picking the right choice. I had no idea, but I

guessed I was going to find out.

“Jax, Morgan,” Ian said. “Thank you for coming in today. And thank you for waiting. We’re ready to take a look at your proposals now. If you’d like to come with me?”

He gestured for us to get to our feet and follow him down the corridor. Jax went first. I wanted to be at the back of the group so nobody could see how much my legs were trembling. I didn’t know what it was, but my mind was rushing at a million miles an hour, unable to control the flow of thoughts getting the better of me. I couldn’t think straight, and I needed to get my shit together before I stepped into that room with the partners.

I watched Jax ahead of me, trying to soothe myself with the familiar stride as he led the way. I couldn’t help but admire the way his broad shoulders tapered down to a V beneath his tailored jacket, the scent of his aftershave in the air. Had he gotten a haircut? He looked a little different, as though something had changed. Or maybe I was just imagining it.

I couldn’t help but remember how good those arms had felt around me, how safe I had felt in his embrace. Back in those days, when I had been willing to allow myself to relax into him, it was like nothing in the world could have gotten to me as long as he was there to protect me against it. When he held me, I knew he would have fought off anyone or anything that got close to me. He never wanted me to get hurt. Even if that embrace was attached to a guy with an ego the size of Manhattan, God, it had felt good, wrapped up in his arms like that.

We arrived outside the door, and Ian led the way. Jax strode in right after him, the picture of confidence. Me, though? I hung back for a moment, taking a deep breath.

I could feel sweat on the palms of my hands, and I quickly wiped them off on my skirt. The last thing I needed was to be sweating and sliding around when I went to shake their hands. I had to be confident. I had to be sure of myself.

Or at least I had to pretend I was all of those things.

Finally, I gathered myself and marched into the room behind him. It was going to be just fine. I was going to get through this. No questions asked. No matter what happened. I had put together a good pitch that I hoped was good enough to land me this job.

No, I wasn’t going to hope. I knew it was good enough. I had been working my ass off to make sure it would live up to the standards they were

expecting, and I refused to let anything get in the way of me nailing this.

I took my seat next to Jax and smiled at the partners opposite me.

“Great to see you again,” I told them. “Shall we get started?”

CHAPTER 23



JAX

Her leg bounced beneath the table so rapidly it was almost a blur. From the waist up, she looked completely contained, totally confident. As far as the three people sitting on the other side of the table were concerned, she was the picture of certainty in herself. But the truth was being exposed by the way she was moving, and I knew she was freaking out.

The KICKS partners were looking over our respective proposals, and they had been for some time now. The silence in the room was nearly deafening, but I tried my best not to let it get to me. It would have been way too easy to allow myself to get drawn into the panic, to the nerves she was obviously letting overwhelm her, but there was no way that I could change how this was going to go now. The ball was firmly in their court, and I knew sitting there panicking wouldn't help my case at all.

I reached over and lightly touched her on the inside of the wrist, out of sight of the partners opposite us. Maybe I should have kept my hands to myself, but there was a part of me that wanted to soothe her and tell her I knew she had done all she could and she couldn't have pushed any further.

Her leg stopped bouncing for a moment, and she stole a glance at me, a small smile on her face.

I had glimpsed a little of the pitch she had put forward, and I had to admit, it looked pretty good. She had taken a different approach to me, more focused on social media and creating an organic groundswell of interest than the more traditional routes I used. It would be a tough call between us, and that wasn't something I was willing to admit about many of the professional opponents I came up against. She knew what she was doing, and I admired the hell out of her innovation on this project.

I didn't know how long they were going to keep us sitting here, waiting for a response. Even I was starting to feel some doubts creeping up on me. I just wanted to find out what was on their minds. I was here to answer any questions they might have had, but it seemed like they were just exchanging a few comments between themselves, nothing more, nothing involving either of us.

Finally, Ian lifted his head and looked at the two of us.

"Thank you so much for these proposals," he told us. "We've had some time to look over them both. Thanks for your patience. And I think it's fair to say—" He glanced between the other partners, and they both nodded.

I leaned forward. This was it. The moment we found out if all our hard work had actually been in aid of something or if we were about to get turned around and told to get out.

"They're both too good to choose between."

"What?" Morgan blurted out before she could stop herself. I could hear the shock in her voice, the confusion, and I didn't blame her. All this time, we had been up against one another, trying to outdo each other, and now, we were being told there was no difference between what we had both turned in?

"I know, I know. It's not the answer either of you were looking for," he admitted, lifting a hand in apology. "But I don't want to make a decision between the two of you so quickly. If one had stood out over the other, we would have told you right away, but both of you have done such an exceptional job that we're going to need to take these away and have a closer look at them. Is that alright with both of you?"

"Of course," she replied smoothly, quickly covering up for her shocked reaction before.

I nodded as well, agreeing. I didn't want to turn this into some kind of issue, even though I wished I could have walked out of this office with closure. I had come to the factory today thinking that, one way or another, everything would be over and done with by the time I walked out but it looked like I wasn't going to get so lucky.

"Thank you," he replied, nodding. "They're both such excellent pitches it's not even about the money or the cost of these approaches. They're both so clearly worth every cent you're putting forward. I know both would be a great fit, but we need to narrow it down to one."

I knew what he was getting at. This was his way of letting us know there was no point in either of us sneaking back to offer a lower price for our

campaign to try and get the win over the other one. They wanted to judge us entirely on our merits, and I appreciated it. I was sure she did, too.

“We’ll be in touch with both of you as soon as we’ve made a decision,” he told us, and with that, we were both ushered out of the room and back into the corridor, still none the wiser about how any of this was going to go.

As soon as the door was shut behind us, she tipped her head back and let out a long sigh of irritation. “Shit, I can’t believe they’re going to make us wait,” she muttered, shaking her head and running her hands through her hair.

She started off down the corridor and I fell in line with her pace. I didn’t want to see her go quite yet, even though I was sure I should have. She probably wanted her space after we hadn’t gotten a straight response to everything happening today, but this might be my last chance to see her, and I didn’t want to waste it.

“At least you know you didn’t get your ass kicked on the first day,” I joked.

She turned to me, raising an eyebrow. “Oh, you’re talking about me getting my ass kicked?” She shook her head. “I saw the way they were looking at my proposal. They’re going to choose mine. They just didn’t want to have to say it to your face.”

She was putting on a good front, but I wasn’t sure if she really believed what she was saying to me. Maybe she wanted to believe it. Maybe she wished she believed in herself as much as she was making out. But the doubts in her eyes were obvious. She was questioning how this was going to go and if she had done enough to win.

“Yeah, maybe,” I replied as we continued down the corridor. There were a million things on the tip of my tongue, a million questions I wanted to ask her. I had imagined after this meeting I could take her out for a drink—either to celebrate or commiserate—and we would get talking without the stress and pressure of this hanging over our heads.

I couldn’t help but think back to what Judy had said to me when she had suggested she was just waiting for me to take the lead and do what needed to be done. Waiting for me to ask her out and confirm the tension I still felt between us. I wanted to, but in the mood she was in, I doubted she would accept. Her mind was still on the project, and it would be until we had found out who had managed to land the damn thing.

She smiled at the receptionist as we walked out, but the grin fell off her face at once as she stared straight ahead and stomped onto the street. I

thought about calling after her before she walked off, but I knew there would be no point. She had clearly already made her mind up about how this day was going to go, and now that it had broken the rules she had laid out for it, she wasn't going to stick around to see how it turned out.

I watched her as she left, and she glanced back toward me for a moment. Her pace slowed for the second our eyes met, as though she was considering walking back to me and suggesting we get a drink or something, something to break the nerves and tension we were still forced to deal with. But before she could, she thought better of it and continued on her way away from the factory—away from me. No doubt back to her office to report the news on how the meeting had gone.

She was right to be frustrated. I was. But my frustration was more aimed at myself than it was at the company because I wished I had the nerve to go after her and tell her I wanted to spend more time with her. Even though I had been the one to lay down the law about the end of this project being the end of the time we would spend together, I wished I could take it back, offer to take her to lunch again. Same place as before, so we could look back on our time together and laugh about what had gone down in the past.

Shit. I was falling for her again.

Maybe I had never really fallen out of love with her, even though I had to tell myself she was part of my past now. She might have walked away from me, but some part of me had always stayed hooked on her, even when I should have known better, even when I should have been moving the hell on. It was easier said than done. Right now, as I watched her leave, I would have done anything to call her back to my side and just talk to her, not even about the project, about anything on her mind. Anything she wanted as long as it meant she didn't have to go so soon.

I was down bad for this girl, and we were professional rivals. I couldn't have made more of a mess of this if I'd tried. If only I had just ignored her at the conference, turned and walked away and left her to it instead of turning this into some chance for me to get under her skin and show her she hadn't beaten me.

But she hadn't. Not yet, anyway. Neither of us had walked away with it yet, and I couldn't wait to see where we were going to go next. Was I going to win? Was she? I didn't know. Our approaches were different but both equally strong. It was going to come down to the smallest details.

I just had to hope I had the upper hand. Because the thought of losing her

and this contract? That was too much for me to handle.

CHAPTER 24



MORGAN

“**T**here you are!” Haley exclaimed as soon as she saw me on the other side of her door. “Did you get it? How did the meeting go?” As soon as she saw the look on my face, she frowned. “Oh, shit, did it go badly? Don’t tell me that asshole got it instead.”

I shook my head, sighing. I had come straight to her place after I had gone back to Susan to let her know what had happened with KICKS. It was so annoying, having to wait even longer to find out who was going to win this thing, and the stress was starting to get the better of me.

“No, he didn’t,” I replied. “But I didn’t, either. They told us they need some more time to think about everything. As if we haven’t waited long enough!”

I made my way into her apartment, which was already covered with everything she had been out buying when we had been shopping together. It was eye-poppingly colorful, but it looked fun, and I knew she loved it like this.

“Oh, my God, that’s so unfair,” she protested. “How much longer are they going to make you wait with all of this?”

“I have no idea,” I admitted, shrugging and flopping down onto her new couch. “I feel like I’m going crazy. I just want all of this over and done with already.”

“I can imagine.” She took a seat next to me and squeezed my shoulder. “I would be losing it if I was in your position. But at least you know he didn’t get it, right?”

“Yeah, that’s something,” I replied. And it was. But at the same time, I just wished I could have put all of this behind me instead of having to drag it

into the future. I thought I would be fully done with him by the time I walked out of that meeting, but instead, I was going to be stuck with him a while longer. They would probably call us in to deliver the news of who had actually gotten the position together, and then I'd have to deal with him sulking or gloating depending on who they decided to go with.

"It's him, isn't it?" she asked. "*He's* what's bothering you?"

"I thought I was out of it," I admitted. "I thought I was done with him. But it feels like, every time I turn around, there he is, ready to cause me trouble again. And I don't know how much more of it I can put up with."

"Wait, did he try and get to you in the meeting?" she asked. My mind flashed back to his gentle touch on my wrist, the small gesture he made to try and soothe me. Not for show, not for anyone but me.

I shook my head. "No, but he just does anyway," I blurted out. "Being around him, it's just so confusing. I don't even know where to start or how I feel or any of it."

I could feel the flush rising up my face, and I hated being so honest about how I felt about him. I should have been able to shut down these feelings a long time ago, but sleeping with him again had brought them all spinning back up to the surface, filling my mind and my heart until he was the only thing left in there.

"You just hooked up once, right?" Haley asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, and it's not like he probably hasn't had other girls on the go at the same time. I know what he's like. He always had women throwing themselves at him. He probably only hooked up with me because I was there, because we were working together."

I stopped myself before I could go any further. I wasn't going to give him the space in my brain. I just wasn't. I had already done enough of that as it was, and I was tired of trying to work out if I wanted more or if these were just old feelings being stirred up again, feelings I thought I had long since left behind.

I hoped that was all it was, but when I thought of him, there was something new there—a zing in my chest and a pulse of excitement. I couldn't wait to see him, even though I tried to push down that reality as far as I could.

"You don't have to worry about him anymore," Haley soothed me. "You're going to be done with him soon, right? It should have been today, sure, but it will be in just a few more. They're not going to make you wait

long, are they?”

“I honestly have no idea.” I sighed. “They might have us waiting a while as they go over it. I’m not sure if this is some kind of test. Maybe they’re doing their best to get one of us to offer something more to win the contract, but I’m just going to leave it. I’ve given them the best I can do. I don’t want to push myself any more than that.”

“Exactly,” she agreed, and she rose to her feet. “You stay here. Let me get you a glass of wine.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, and for the first time since I’d arrived, I actually started to take a look around her apartment. It was really beginning to come together, with all the chaotic pieces she’d brought in somehow forming a cohesive look. I liked it. It reminded me of her. Nobody else but Haley could have lived in a place like this.

“I like what you’ve done with the place,” I said as I gestured around.

She smiled as she handed me a glass of wine. “Oh, really?” She beamed at me. “I love it. I know it’s kind of obnoxious, but whatever.”

“It’s totally you,” I replied.

She laughed. “So, you’re calling me obnoxious now?” she teased.

I giggled. “You know that’s not what I meant,” I assured her. “I mean it’s totally somewhere I could see you living. You’ve made it your own.”

“Not sure the landlord’s going to be too happy when I start painting, but hey, all I have to do is cover it up when I go, right?” she replied with a shrug.

“Did he deal with your gas for you?” I asked her. “I can go handle him if not.”

“No, no, you intimidated him into making sure it’s dealt with.” She laughed. “I don’t think he would have dared let me down after the way you talked to him. That’s for sure.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied, and I took a sip of the wine. I was going to need a lot if I was planning to be able to forget about everything that had happened with Jax earlier in the day.

Maybe I should have been feeling relieved. It wasn’t all put to bed quite yet, but the rollercoaster of emotion I’d been on since he had walked back into my life had to be over now, didn’t it? Behind me once and for all. I wasn’t going to have to be around him or run into him at the KICKS factory. Maybe once more, but that would be the end of it. It should have been a relief.

But when I thought about the way he touched my wrist so lightly, so

gently, as though he was trying to remind me everything was going to be okay, it was difficult for me to believe I was nothing more than a convenient fuck to him. I knew we couldn't do what we'd done again, not while we were working against each other, but maybe there was still something we could salvage.

Both of us had changed so much and come so far in the time since we'd last known one another, and some part of me still thought we would make a great couple. Maybe even better than we had been before because now both of our priorities were in the same place. Both of us were focused on work, on achieving as much as we possibly could, getting out into the world, and landing at the top of the career ladder. We could support each other through the ups and downs of it, the hard stuff, and share the celebrations when we won out.

It was nothing more than wishful thinking, I could tell. This fantasy of how things could have been between us if I just played my cards right, did and said the right things, was never going to happen. I had broken his heart all those years ago, and he couldn't just forget about it. I was sure it was revenge that had driven him to get involved with the KICKS contract in the first place, a chance to get one over on me for what had happened between us.

I wished I had the nerve to just turn around and ask him what this was. Was it as serious as I wanted it to be or was it nothing more than a bit of fun while we had been working together? I had no idea how he would take that, though, and the last thing I wanted was to expose myself as having deeper feelings for him than I should have.

All of this was a risk, and I was running dangerously close to exposing myself to him, showing him that vulnerable part of me he could exploit if he wanted to. And how the hell would I survive it if I found out he did? If I found out he had only been doing all of this because he knew he could make me pay for hurting him when we were back in college?

Haley and I chatted about her plans for the apartment, and I was grateful for the distraction. It was like I was being trapped in limbo. There was no way out for me until I discovered which way they were going with the contract. I knew they liked mine, but they clearly loved his, too, and I didn't fancy my chances of winning against someone as experienced and confident as him.

"You thinking about him again?" Haley asked me as she noticed me

drifting off. I blinked, trying to bring myself back into the moment. My best friend was in front of me, offering to help, and I was sitting around like an ungrateful bitch thinking about some guy I was hung up on.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “Let me go refill the wine, okay? I’ll be back in a second.”

“It’s okay,” she called after me as I made my way through to her kitchen. The walls were bright yellow, and she had already painted the cabinets lavender, a cheerful clash of color that seemed to fill the room with light.

“You can talk to me about him if you want,” she offered, but I didn’t want to waste any more brain space on him than I already had. No doubt he was already working on his next project, not sitting around thinking about me, and the only way I was going to be able to get anywhere close to doing the same thing would be if I dropped him from my brain’s rotation and forgot any of this had ever happened.

I topped off the wine, and before I could pick up the glasses, I felt my phone buzz in my pocket. A shock of excitement coursed through me. This could be it. This could be them letting me know who they had decided they wanted to work with on this project. God only knew how much I needed a win today, and I grabbed my phone to see who it was.

Sure enough, it was the KICKS people and they were letting me know they had, indeed, made a decision on how they wanted to move forward with the advertising campaign. But I had to read the message three times before it sank in and the reality of it clicked inside my head.

Because there was no way they could be asking me what I thought they were asking me, right?

But, as I stared at the message, it didn’t change. It stayed the same.

“No fucking way,” I muttered, and I grabbed the wine and hurried to update Haley on this latest level of bullshit.

CHAPTER 25



JAX

“Hey, you want another drink?” Max asked.

I nodded. I felt like I was going to need several if I was going to get through the night without letting my true emotions show. With all the guys around me, I wasn't ready to spill the enormous truth of what was going on inside my head.

As soon as I had returned from the KICKS meeting, Max had noticed there was something up with me, and he had insisted we all head out to the bar to blow off some steam and have some fun. It wasn't like the rest of the guys had any trouble getting on board. Graham, Spencer, Derrick, and Seb had jumped at the chance when Max had pitched the idea, and we'd headed down to this overpriced place on the corner of the same street as our office. I never really bothered with it, preferring somewhere I could meet women if I was going out, but with the state my head was in, I would take any distraction I could get.

Max and I carried the round back over to the table, and Seb lifted his glass, nearly sloshing a little whiskey over the rim. They were all already getting a little tipsy, letting loose, and I wished I could have kept up with them, but my mind was somewhere else.

“To Jax!” he exclaimed. “And getting us that KICKS project.”

“I haven't gotten it yet,” I tried to protest, but the other guys were already joining in, toasting along with Seb.

“You're going to jinx it,” I remarked. “Make sure I don't get it at all.”

“You're going to be fine,” Max replied, waving a hand, dismissing my doubts. “You've done well. I saw the proposal. They'd be crazy not to go with you. They just want to make sure, that's all.”

“Maybe,” I muttered, and I lowered my gaze down to the table as the guys chatted around me. Normally at an outing like this, I would have been right there in the middle of it, cracking jokes, laughing, goofing off, but right now, I couldn’t think of anything worse. There was only one person I wanted to be with, and she was probably at her office, working her ass off to make sure she landed this campaign.

“What’s up with you?” Derrick asked, pointing his finger in my direction.

I had hoped the guys weren’t going to pick up on my mood because the last thing I needed was to be called out for how miserable I was being. I just wanted to go home, but if I tried, they all would have argued for me to stay. I wasn’t going to make a scene. I was just going to sit here for a few more drinks and hope they would get bored of having me and my miserable ass around for much longer.

“Nothing,” I replied, and I tried to turn the conversation back to whatever they had been discussing, but before I could, Max drunkenly slapped me on the shoulder.

“You’re just sad about Morgan, right?”

“Morgan?” Seb piped up, frowning. “Who’s that?”

“Just the person who was working on the project for the other company,” I replied quickly. I fired a look at Max, but he was too oblivious to notice that I didn’t want this spilled for everyone to hear. I knew he wasn’t trying to be an asshole, but sometimes, he acted like one. He probably just wanted everyone to agree with him that I should forget all about her, as though it was ever going to be so easy for me.

“Yeah, and your ex,” Max remarked.

My shoulders sagged. It was out there now.

“Woah, you were working with your ex?” Spencer’s eyes widened. “Damn, that’s rough. Why did the two of you break up?”

“It doesn’t matter,” I replied firmly, and my tone must have been harsh enough that even Max got it through his head he wasn’t to spill any more of my secrets to the guys. He didn’t mean it to come off like that, but there was a reason I chose to keep to myself when it came to my dating life. I knew how the guys would see me. It would change the way they thought of me. They looked at me as some player who was willing to hook up with any woman he could get his hands on, and if they knew I had been heartbroken by a girl back in college, they would never believe it.

They might see through the façade I had put up to keep anyone from

hurting me the way she had. But what good had that done? She had still managed to get inside my head again and bury herself there once more, and now, all I wanted was to be with her—while she didn't seem to want a thing to do with me.

“Yeah, she's just some girl he knows he can't see again,” Max continued. “That's what's got you down, right, buddy?”

I nodded, and the rest of the guys seemed to drop it, much to my relief. I didn't want their sympathy. I didn't want them to look at me as someone heartbroken, even though it was how I felt. All the feelings I had tried to push down, all the love I'd had for her, had come flooding back up to the surface, and I wasn't sure if it was just memories or if there was the beginning of something new here. Something better than before.

I sighed and made my way to the bar to grab myself a glass of water, basically needing an excuse to get away from the table. I was sure they were interrogating Max on what was going on with me as soon as I turned my back, but I didn't care. I just needed a second to pull myself together before I headed back to join them. They might have questions about what was going on with me, but it didn't mean I had to answer them. All of this was in the past—or it would be as soon as the KICKS company decided who they were going to work with.

I was sure it would be her. Or maybe I just wanted it to be. I had seen how much this meant to her, and I had always been pulling for her, even way back in the day when we'd been dating. It felt natural to want the best for her, even if it meant sacrificing something I wanted in the process.

But it didn't feel like a sacrifice when it came to her. It never had, and that was the problem. It always felt like the most natural thing in the world, as though she deserved it. I wanted to give her the world. It was why I had purchased that ring all those years ago. I had thought, naively maybe, that I could give her everything she needed for the rest of her life. I had been so young back then but so sure of myself, so certain I could take care of her, no matter what that might have looked like.

If she had given me the chance, maybe I could. I didn't know. It was like a timeline sparked off from the one we lived in where she hadn't broken up with me and the two of us had stayed together and lived out our lives with one another. I wondered what it felt like out there, wondered if we had made it work.

I needed to stop thinking about it and stop letting myself get caught up in

what *might* have happened. What was really important was what had actually gone down. She'd left me. And now we were up against each other. It was as simple as that, and I wasn't going to let myself keep obsessing over it.

I was about to turn back to the table when I felt my phone buzz, and I grabbed for it at once. I knew there was no way, but I found myself hoping it was her, hoping I was going to answer it and see her words staring back at me. If she had asked me to come over, I would have dropped everything I was doing and run to her. She still had so much power over me, more than I was sure she even realized. It was a good thing she didn't understand how deep it ran. The thought of letting her get under my skin like that would have been dangerous, no matter how much I wanted it.

The text wasn't from her. It was from KICKS.

Was this it? Had they made the call? I hovered my finger over the open button, not certain I was ready for it. If I opened this and it was all over, there would be no reason for me to see Morgan again. I wouldn't have a single fallback explanation for spending more time with her, and I didn't know if I was ready to accept it quite yet.

But I had to sooner or later, and sooner was the better option. I opened up the message and my jaw dropped when I saw what they were proposing. There was no way they could be serious about this.

Instead of the water, I got something stronger and made my way back over to the table. Of everything I had expected to hear from them, this had been at the very bottom of the list. They couldn't have thought this through.

"What's up, Jax?" Derrick asked as I arrived back at the table. "You look like you just got hit by a damn bus."

"It's KICKS," I explained, holding up my phone as I tried to wrap my head around the news I had just gotten. None of it made sense to me. I was sure I had to have read it wrong. But with how they had reacted to both of our proposals, maybe this made the most sense.

"They got back to you?" Max asked with excitement in his voice. "What are they saying? You got it, right?"

"Yeah, I did," I replied, and there was a cheer around the table, but before they could get too excited, I lifted my hand to stop them in their tracks.

"And so did she," I added, turning my phone around. "They want us to work on this project together."

Silence fell around the table, and I knew each and every one of them was thinking exactly what I was.

Oh shit.

CHAPTER 26



MORGAN

I banged on Haley's door and called her name. No way could she be asleep. It was the middle of the damn day. Surely she would be up by now.

But when she finally opened the door and I saw her messy hair and confused expression, I knew she had been passed out right up until the moment I had turned up. I laughed when I saw her crumpled face, still marked with the pillow she had been sleeping on a few minutes earlier.

"Haley, what the hell are you doing asleep?" I teased her. "It's nearly one in the afternoon!"

"Yeah, and it's a Sunday," she protested, shaking her head and yawning. "If there's any day where I can sleep in without getting bothered, it's meant to be this one, isn't it?"

"It might have been once," I replied as I stepped over the threshold into her place. "But I'm here now. You want me to put on a pot of coffee? I brought over some pastries."

"Perfect, I'm starving." She sighed as she wandered behind me into her kitchen in her bare feet and oversized sleep shirt. A few plates were still scattered around the place from the night before, and I piled them swiftly into the sink. I liked order, and on a day like this when I was so nervous about what was coming next for me, I knew it would do me good to try and stay on top of it.

"What are you doing here, anyway?" she asked as I made us a pot of coffee and grabbed some plates from the cupboard.

"I just didn't want to be in my place by myself for the rest of the day," I explained to her, shaking my head. "I have the meeting with KICKs tomorrow. You know, with Jax?"

“Oh, shit, that’s already happening?” she replied, pulling a face.

I had been at her place on Friday when I had gotten the text letting me know about what was going on with the contract. They didn’t want to choose between our pitches and, instead, had chosen to ask us to work on it together.

I was still trying to wrap my head around what it was going to look like for me to have to stick next to him a little while longer. None of it seemed fair. I thought I had finally managed to get rid of him. I had been looking forward to the end of the pitch session so I would be able to put some real distance between us, but it looked as though I wasn’t going to get so lucky.

More than anything, I hated how confused I was about the way I felt about him. I shouldn’t have been dealing with this level of mess inside my mind. We had been together and we had broken up. That should have been the end of it, right?

And yet, I knew I wasn’t going to get so lucky. Not now. Not when we were going to be working together.

“Yeah, that’s already happening,” I replied, shaking my head. “I have no idea how I’m going to handle all of it. It just feels so crazy to me, you know?”

“You don’t have to accept it, do you?” She grabbed the croissant from her plate and took a bite, spraying crumbs all over the kitchen floor around her.

“I guess not,” I replied. “But if I don’t, he’ll get the position. I don’t want to just hand it to him like that.”

“He might not have accepted it,” she pointed out. “Maybe he turned it down already.”

“I doubt it,” I replied, though she wasn’t wrong. I got the feeling he wouldn’t have walked away from something like that so soon, not if he could avoid it. Not if he felt like he stood a chance to get his hands on the position he wanted so badly.

“Yeah, well, I guess you’ll have a better idea after the meeting, right?” She shrugged.

I nodded. “Guess I will.”

The truth was, I hated waiting for anything, and I hated not knowing how this was going to turn out, even if it shouldn’t have bothered me that much. In just twenty-four hours, the meeting would be over and done with, and I would have a way better idea of how we were going to be moving forward. And yet, I felt like my ass was on fire, unable to sit still until I knew what was going on.

Haley and I made our way to her living room, and she planted herself down on the couch and turned to me, narrowing her eyes curiously.

“And what about things between you guys?” she asked pointedly.

“How do you mean?” I replied, dodging the question, though I knew well what she was getting at.

She wanted to know what was going on in our relationship, if things were still as chaotic and confusing as they had been when we had last met. I had no idea. I didn’t know where we stood or what I wanted from him, if anything at all. And I didn’t know how I was going to get it if I did.

It would have been smarter for me to just put that side of our relationship out of my mind, but it had never worked so easily when it came to him. He found some way to wriggle inside my head, and nothing I could do seemed to shake him loose.

“You’ll have to see more of him, right?” she asked. “You’ll have to spend more time together. You must be feeling some type of way about that.”

“I don’t know,” I confessed finally. I might have had to keep up the front at work, but I could be honest with her.

“I just feel like I’m letting myself get caught up with a guy who’s already got a reputation,” I explained, shrugging. “And I don’t want to walk myself right into trouble I don’t know how to deal with.”

“Reputation?”

“Like, he goes through women all the time,” I replied. “Just because we dated in the past, it doesn’t mean he’s going to suddenly just forget about everything he used to do, everything he used to be, will it? He’s still going to want those things. He’s used to having women just throwing themselves at him. He’s not going to handle it well if he has to stop that.”

“And do you want him to?”

Her words gave me pause. I had been trying my hardest not to think about it all this time, trying with all my strength not to imagine what a future might look like with the two of us now, but it had started to worm its way inside my head, and there was nothing I could do to change it.

“No, probably not,” I admitted finally. “I’m just caught up in what we used to have, that’s all. I know the reality would be nothing like it, not really.”

“Exactly,” she agreed with a firm nod. “You don’t need to let him throw you off your game. Especially not when you’re so close to scoring this contract.”

“Yeah, but what if it means I have to work with him to do it?” I replied, making a face. “I don’t want to be stuck with him. Things are already confusing enough as it is.”

“I don’t know,” she replied, narrowing her eyes as though she was trying to put the pieces together in her own head.

I had been giving it a lot of thought—what we might get up to if we actually both took the contract and wound up working together. The thought of it was at least a little fun. I knew what had happened when we had been working in close proximity before. We had ended up hooking up right there in the KICKS office they had laid out for us. Just because we’d sworn it wouldn’t happen again didn’t mean it was utterly in our past now, right? The chemistry was still there. The tension. The desire.

Maybe something would come of it. When I had gotten back from my wine session with Haley on Friday, I had allowed myself to daydream about how it might go down. I could still remember how good we were together, even after all these years apart, and I was sure we would be able to pick up right where we had left off and make it so we could just dive in head first and enjoy ourselves if we wanted to.

There wouldn’t be any of that weird stuff where you were trying to figure out the other person’s likes or dislikes. He’d always had this deep, intuitive knowledge of what got me off, and I seemed to have the same for him. If we could just get back there, we could pick up where we’d left off.

“So, what are you doing next weekend? A friend of mine has this gig, and she can get us in for free if you want to come,” Haley said, pulling me out of the reverie I was drifting off to inside my head.

I blinked, trying to remind myself where I was. I had already invaded Haley’s place when she had still been in bed. The least I could do was stop myself from getting distracted when she was trying to talk to me.

“Uh, yeah, maybe,” I replied, even though I doubted I would be able to attend. No matter what happened with the meeting tomorrow, I was going to be crazy busy with work afterward, either trying to keep on top of the new contract or doing everything I could to prove to Susan that I was still worth keeping around even though I had missed out on the KICKS account.

I didn’t want to let this define my career one way or another. I had to remember how hard I had worked to get here, how much effort I had put in to achieve what I had. Just because Jax had turned up, it didn’t undo any of that. I wasn’t going to make any allowances for him, even if some part of me

wanted to.

Even if I had asked him to pull out of this race so I could get where I needed to go.

I pushed away that thought quickly. It was nothing more than a moment that made me cringe now, when I had met with him for dinner and asked him to drop out of the fight so I could take it. Honestly, he was right when he had said I would never have been happy with it if he had. I wanted to beat him, fair and square.

But instead, it looked like I was going to have to join forces with him. He was about the last person on Earth I wanted to have to do that with. But if I needed to work with him to pull this off, so be it. I wasn't always going to be able to work with people I loved. This was just going to be practice for later down the line, practice for me in handling people I might not have particularly chosen to get on to a project alongside.

My heart twisted in my chest when I thought about seeing him again tomorrow. I had no idea how he had taken this news, what he was thinking now he knew we were going to be working together. Maybe he had even decided to turn down the offer, wanting to put as much space between us as possible.

But I wouldn't have to wait much longer to find out.

CHAPTER 27



JAX

As I rolled up to Derrick's place, I inhaled a big lungful of the clear air and stepped out of the car. I had been glad when he'd given me a call earlier, asking me to come around and give him a hand handling everything. He needed help building a new deck, and I was more than willing to get out of my head and out of my apartment to do what I could to help.

I wasn't sure I would have lasted much longer in there anyway. I felt like I was losing my mind, all shut up in that place, and I was sure everyone would be able to tell. Hell, maybe this call from Derrick was a mercy attempt, making sure I didn't spend any longer than I already had lost in my thoughts and consumed with the theory of what I was going to do tomorrow when I had to face her again for the first time.

I still couldn't fucking believe the KICKS people had pulled us in to work on the same project. We were from different brands, with different approaches, with different pitches. That was the reason they had us facing off against one another in the first place. They knew it would be easier to do it like that than it would be to try and force us into a single space to work on something together. If this was what they had wanted, why not just pitch it from the start, instead of playing it this strangely?

I had to go to that meeting tomorrow, though. I had thought about turning it down, but the guys had soon put a firm stop to that at the bar when I had gotten the message.

"You can't just let her take it," Max had urged me. "You have to get down to that meeting and show her she doesn't just get to walk away with this. She's probably counting on you to give up, right?"

"I guess," I muttered. I had thought I was out of the mess I had been in

with her, out of the space she had taken up in my brain. I hadn't even really cared who got the job at the end of the day. All I cared about was making sure I could put distance between us again and get out from underneath the intensity of her attention.

They had told me to take the meeting, at least to see what they had to say to me. It was the right choice, no doubt, but one I wished I could shoot down. I just hated the thought of having to work with her. Not because I didn't want to be around her but because I wanted more than anything in the world to spend time with her, and I wasn't sure how much longer I could keep up the façade of not desiring anything more from her company.

Derrick was out in the front yard, staring over a stack of wooden poles and sticks like he was trying to decipher the Rosetta stone. He glanced around when he heard me approaching.

"Oh, thank fuck," he muttered. "I have no damn idea what I'm doing. Where am I meant to start?"

"Hello to you too," I replied and stepped over his fence to take the instructions from his hand.

"Thanks for coming over, man. I feel like I'm losing it here," he said, scratching the back of his head. "You got any idea how I'm meant to handle all of this?"

"I think so," I replied, and I glanced over at him with amusement. "Can't imagine I was your first choice, though."

"Oh, come on, you know I trust you with this stuff," he protested. "Of course you were!"

"You're a liar." I laughed. "Oh, sorry, *lawyer*. Come on, we need to start digging some holes for the supporting beams."

We set to work overturning the earth in his yard to make room for the new deck. It was tough work, but I was glad for it. Anything to pull me out of my head for a while. At least, it was working well until Derrick brought up work.

"Can't believe we're out here building my deck," he grumbled. "I thought I was supposed to be successful enough not to have to do this now."

"You could hire someone if you weren't such a cheap-ass," I teased him.

He shrugged but nodded. "Yeah, you've got a point," he agreed. "Still can't take that out of me, I guess."

"You'd think you've come far enough to leave that behind now," I said.

"Still can't believe how far we've come, to be honest," Derrick said as he

leaned on his shovel and wiped the sweat from his brow. “Doesn’t feel real. I guess when it starts to sink in I’ll start acting like a rich asshole, you know?”

“Can’t wait to see that,” I said.

He turned to me, raising his eyebrows. “So, how are you feeling about the meeting tomorrow?”

I sighed. “I don’t even want to think about it.”

“Is it because of that girl?”

“Yeah, it’s because of the girl,” I replied. I figured there was little point in trying to deny it now, since everyone seemed to know I still had feelings for her. How much had Max told them? I wished I could actually convince him to keep his damn mouth shut, but I knew it wouldn’t have mattered. He was never good at doing what I told him.

“You can’t let her get in the way of it,” he told me. “We’ve got so much more to achieve. I can feel it. And this? This is a deal we can’t turn down.”

“The money’s not even that good,” I replied. “There are bigger places we could be working for.”

“Yeah, but the clout we’d get working for one of the most popular up-and-coming brands in the country right now would make up for that,” he replied. “If we get in on the ground floor of a business like theirs, who knows where it could take us? Even if it means working with a girl you have a past with, why would you let that get in the way?”

I almost wanted to snap at him, tell him he really didn’t get just how deeply my past ran with her, just how far back we went. But I knew it wouldn’t have helped, and I knew it would have been my attempt to cover up the depths of my emotions. I thought I had been out. I thought I had managed to put some distance between us, but instead, I was going to be seeing her in just a few hours, and I didn’t know how either of us were going to take it.

“You’re right.” I sighed. “I just don’t know how to be around her without letting that stuff come up.”

“You just have to learn to compartmentalize,” he explained to me. “Keep work and your personal life separate. You’ve been doing that so far anyway, haven’t you?”

“Yeah, but I’ve never had to deal with someone like her, someone with the history we have,” I reminded him. “That’s the issue I’m having. I don’t know how to shut down the little voice in my head that tells me there could be...” I trailed off before I could go further. I didn’t want to spill more than I meant to. I knew he was just trying to help me, but it probably would have

gotten back to everyone else at the office, and I wasn't sure I wanted them knowing my business.

"It doesn't matter," I muttered, shutting myself down before I could go any further.

"Yeah, it does, man, especially if it might get in the way of this contract," he urged me. "Come on. Compartmentalize. You know how to do that, right?"

"I thought I did," I admitted. "Not with her, though."

"Okay, so it works like this," he told me, spreading his arms wide as though he was about to introduce me to a huge, expansive theory. "Imagine you're a bird, right?" He pointed to the shovel I had been leaning on while he spoke. "Now, dig a hole."

"You're just trying to get out of doing work," I said.

He shook his head. "Trust me, this is more important work than building this deck," he told me. "Do it, go on."

I rolled my eyes cheerfully and did as I was told. No harm in giving it a go even if I didn't know where he was going with this. I tried to focus on digging the hole as I attempted to keep in mind what he had told me about acting like a bird or something, too. Was he expecting me to take flight at any moment?

No matter what his point was, I found I couldn't keep digging the hole and focus on this fantasy he was trying to get me to live too. I looked back up at him when I was done, and he raised his eyebrows at me.

"See? I bet you forgot all about being a bird while you were digging, didn't you?" he pointed out.

"Yeah, but I don't see what that's got to do with Morgan and the meeting tomorrow."

"You can't? That's what I've been telling you, man, compartmentalize!" he exclaimed, shaking his head as though he couldn't believe I was having such a hard time wrapping my head around it.

"You can't dig a hole and pretend to be a bird at the same time, and you can't take on this contract and spend all your time thinking about her, either," he continued. "You just don't have the room in your brain for it. And trust me, that's a good thing."

"I guess so," I replied, even though I couldn't help but think he had no clue how much space in my brain was taken up by her, whether I wanted it to be or not. There was no way around it. No matter how much I tried to shut

her out and shut out the memories of the two of us together, they always seemed to find their way back in before I could get rid of them.

“I know I’m right about this,” he told me, turning to grab for his shovel so he could get back to work. “If you keep your mind on work, there’s not going to be enough time for you to think about her. You’ll just have to forget about her, even if you’re working together, right?”

“Sure,” I replied. I wanted him to believe me so I could move on from this conversation, but more than anything, I wanted to believe none of this was going to stick in my mind and that I could be working with her and that it could be easy for me. I had no idea if she was even going to turn up at this meeting tomorrow, though I doubted she would give up her ground so easily. She was too stubborn, too determined, even if she probably wished this could all just be over with. Same as I did.

I returned my attention to helping out with the deck. Maybe if I worked hard enough today, I could just tire myself out enough to crash into bed and get some rest. I wanted my head to hit the pillow and for me to pass out and not spend the whole night tossing and turning and thinking of her.

I knew the chances of actually getting that were slim, but hey, a guy could dream, right?

Even if the last thing I wanted was to find myself dreaming of her again.
Of us, together.

CHAPTER 28



MORGAN

I never got nervous. At least, I didn't before I started working with him again.

It felt like my mind was rushing faster than I could control it, and I had no idea how to slow it down or catch my breath. Everything was getting the better of me, and, as I stood outside the KICKS factory, I clenched my hands into fists to try and control the panic that was threatening to drive me full-blown crazy.

This was it. I was going to see him again. Going to see the man I hadn't been able to stop thinking about. The man who I had thought I would finally be done with, for better or for worse. And in just a few minutes' time, I would be sitting in an office with him, trying to keep my game face on and make it look as though I wasn't in full-blown stress meltdown mode.

I tried to soothe myself and wiped my sweaty palms on my skirt. God, it was just like the last meeting all over again. And now, I had to drag my ass through the same thing. How could any of this be fair? I had handed over my pitch to them, and I felt like it should have been enough to earn me an out. Why wasn't it? Why wasn't this done already?

I plastered a smile on my face and made my way inside. I didn't have to agree to their terms if I didn't want to. I had to keep reminding myself of that. I could turn them down and tell them there was no way I would work with him. Susan had pushed me to take it, but she couldn't make me do it if I didn't want to. I had to keep that in mind, no matter how tempting it might be to just let myself walk out and give my mind the break it so sorely needed.

I greeted the woman behind the desk. "Hi, I'm here for the meeting with the owners."

“Of course, if you wouldn’t mind waiting over there,” she told me, nodding toward a new set of chairs that had been put in opposite the reception desk. I took a seat, perched on the edge, feeling as though my whole body was wracked with tension. I was so stiff, it felt like my muscles were going to rip on the spot.

I smoothed a hand over my head and closed my eyes. He wasn’t here. He would have been waiting right here for me if he had been. I had made it in first. I felt a little spike of triumph in my chest. I was already doing better than him.

Maybe he had decided not to come. Maybe he had taken one look at the offer they had laid out and decided to turn his back on it. No way he wanted to work with me on this, right? Perhaps that had worked in my favor. I bit my lip as I looked around, hoping against hope he wasn’t going to roll in.

But within a minute, he had walked in too. He glanced around, and when he spotted me, I could tell he had been hoping for the same thing I had—me dropping out, backing down so he didn’t have to handle my presence here.

He quickly cleared that look from his face, though, and made his way over to the reception desk, chatting to the woman there for a moment. She laughed at something he said, and I felt a spike of jealousy. At whom? At him for making a good impression? Or at her for getting to be the center of his attention, even just for a moment? I needed to get my shit together. I was acting crazy.

Before he could come over to the seats to join me, the partners strolled out of a large door opposite reception. I sprang to my feet, extending my hand and smiling widely, as Jax did the same thing.

God, he looked good. His dark blue suit popped against his skin. He looked like he was ready to take on the world, and I knew I had to be able to keep up with his attitude if I stood a chance of taking him on here.

“We have the meeting room ready for you,” Ian told us. “Thank you both for coming in today. I know our pitch wasn’t exactly what either of you were expecting. But we’d love to discuss it in some more detail.”

For the first time, Jax looked at me. His eyes flashed off mine for a moment, and a jolt of excitement rushed down my spine. I hated myself for it. How was it he could have this kind of effect on me? Shouldn’t I be beyond this by now? Shouldn’t I be able to handle being this close to him without my body trying to draw in close to him, trying to indulge in all the chemistry I still felt for him?

We arrived at the meeting room, and I put a good couple of seats between myself and Jax so I could focus. He flexed his hands beneath the table, a signifier of his nerves. He might have done all he could to pretend he was confident, but I knew him too well to fall for it. There was something relieving to me about knowing he was probably just as nervous as I was right now, even though he would do everything to project the image of himself as pure self-assurance.

“So, as you know from the deal we offered both of you, we’d love to have the two of you work together on this upcoming project,” Ian explained to us. “Obviously, you’ll both receive your full fees. We’re not expecting you to compromise anything. And I understand this is less than conventional, which is why we wanted to talk about our reasoning behind it with you.”

They delved into the logic behind all of this, and I did my best to keep up. I got it. They were impressed with both of the pitches that we put together, and with our very different approaches, they couldn’t choose between us. Instead of pushing one of us out of the equation, they wanted us to come together and work on the project together, bringing both of our disparate takes into one style that would provide them with the best and most effective result.

I did my best to take it all in, but all I could think about was him right next to me, so close to me I could just reach out and touch him. I could brush my fingertips against his hand, show him how much I had missed him. My head was throbbing with questions for them, questions for him, and questions for myself about whether I could actually handle working with him or if I was just kidding myself with the promise I could so I didn’t have to back out of this deal so quickly. I had come too far to let him take it now, but if I accepted the offer, the two of us would be around each other all the time, working in close quarters from here on out.

By the time they had finished up, I was no closer to making a call on what I thought the right way forward was. I had been sure that, sitting here with them and listening to what they had to say, would smooth out the doubts I’d been clinging onto and allow me to see more clearly, but if anything, it had just made my head into even more of a mess. I was half-thinking of accepting just so I could spend more time with Jax, but I knew it would have been the height of damn stupidity. This was about work, not pleasure, not anything else, and I had to keep that at the front of my mind or risk losing everything I had worked for.

Everything I had told myself I would never have been able to achieve if I had tried to do it with him by my side.

I inhaled deeply and smiled at them all, hoping they couldn't tell what was going on inside my mind. They had no idea about our past together, and I wanted to keep it that way. I knew how these things went, how easy it was for them to just assume I was some crazy jilted ex and side with the man, even if it was totally unfair for them to do so. I wasn't going to let them paint me with that brush inside their heads.

"So, the question is, is this an opportunity you'd like to take us up on?" Ian asked, leaning toward us and raising his eyebrows pointedly.

I parted my lips, planning to reply, but before I could, Jax cut in over me.

"I think we need to talk about it first." He looked over at me. "Wouldn't you agree, Morgan?"

"Yes, of course," I replied, and I let out a breath I didn't even know I had been holding. He was right. The only way to the bottom of this was if we actually talked it over with each other and worked out how we actually felt about this going forward. If we were going to be partners in this—and *just* in this—we had to run it past each other first.

"I'd like a moment to speak with Morgan alone," he continued, glancing over at them. "Is that alright?"

"Of course, of course," Ian agreed, getting to his feet. "Take all the time you need. Give reception a call when you're ready to talk on this further, okay? It's just one on the internal phone."

"Will do," he replied, and he watched as they made their way out of the room.

I couldn't help but feel nervous. Being alone with him was a lot. It brought to mind our hookup in the factory not that long ago—the feel of him moving inside me, his breath on my neck—and I craved it again, even though I knew how wrong it was.

Once the door was shut behind them, the room filled with an all-consuming silence. I wasn't sure who was expected to break it first. Was he waiting for me to say something? Waiting for me to tell him I couldn't do this or I could. Hell, I didn't have a damn clue where I was meant to start, and it was making my head twist up in a million different directions as I tried to navigate the quiet between us.

Finally, he shifted in his seat, turning to face me. I did the same. God, could he sense my heart pounding in my chest? The thing about him knowing

me so well was that he had to be able to tell when something was getting to me, and I was sure he could read all the signals I was giving off that spoke to how freaked I was.

He raised his eyebrows, his gaze searching mine as though looking for an answer to a question he already had his own answer to.

“So,” he said. “What are you thinking about all of this?”

CHAPTER 29



JAX

She sat there and just looked at me for a moment, as though she was doing everything she could to figure out my angle.

But I didn't have an angle. I just genuinely wanted to know what was on her mind, and this seemed to be the best way to do it. I had no doubt her brain was running through every option, every possibility, every outcome. And I needed to know whether she thought they were worth chasing down. Whether it was worth dealing with each other to get there.

"I don't like working with other people," she told me, her voice edged with doubt. Was she expecting me to argue with her? Tell her to look at it in some other way? I wasn't going to fight for her to work with me on this, not if she didn't want to. I had better things to be doing than pleading with her to join me on this. If she walked out, they would just hand it over to me, and I was sure she was well aware of it. She would look bad, unable and unwilling to compromise, and she didn't want to give them such a rough impression of her.

"You don't like working with other people?" I asked her. "Or you don't like working with *me*?"

She didn't reply. She didn't have to. I could already tell what was going on in her head. She pouted and glanced toward the door Ian and the others had just walked out of.

"It doesn't really matter either way," she replied.

"Why, because you're going to give up on this?" I asked her. I wasn't sure exactly what conclusion I was trying to push her toward, but I was determined to get to the bottom of it. I could take this position, make it mine, and do everything I needed to do without her there, but there was a part of me

still rooting for her to pull through and prove she could do this job, even if I could tell she was having her doubts.

“I’m not going to give up on it,” she shot back defensively. “I’m not like that.”

“So, you want to work together, then?” I said. “Because that’s the only way we’re going to get this position. If we do it together.”

She sighed heavily, squeezed her eyes shut for a moment, and then nodded.

“I guess so,” she muttered, shoulders sagging. “I guess we’re going to have to work together.”

Hearing those words come out of her mouth was more than a little strange to me. I had never imagined we would get here, but maybe this was where the two of us had always been headed. The moment I had seen her again, I had wanted to make sure she knew how far I had come, what I had done to get where I was, and proving that wasn’t going to stop here. No, it was going to keep going, right into us working on this project together.

“Guess so,” I replied, flashing her a grin. “So, do you want me to take the lead?”

That got to her. Her eyes narrowed.

“Okay, first things first,” she told me firmly. “Nobody takes the lead, okay?”

“Unless it’s you,” I teased her.

“Yeah, well, I’ve always been more organized,” she replied, shrugging. “It just makes sense.”

“Oh, so you’re happy playing leaders as long as you get to be the one in charge?”

“Forget I said that,” she replied, shaking her head and waving her hand. “We need to lay down some ground rules if we’re going to do this.”

“Such as?” I said, cocking an eyebrow. I wanted to know just where she was drawing the lines, just where she was keeping her distance, and just how much closer she was going to allow the two of us to get.

“We work down here at the KICKS factory,” she replied. “Neutral ground. I’m not going to come to your office, and I won’t expect you to come to mine. Deal?”

“Sounds sensible to me,” I replied. I figured it wouldn’t take long for us to walk that back, given that we were probably going to have to drop off stuff last minute now that we were working together. As much as she might have

wanted us to keep our distance, it wasn't going to be that easy.

"And we have to run any ideas past each other before we turn them in to the KICKS partners," she continued. "You can't put in anything behind my back, and I won't either."

"I wouldn't dream of it," I replied, eyeing her with amusement. "Why? Were you thinking of pulling something like that?"

"Any ground rules you want to lay down?" she asked, ignoring my question pointedly.

I snorted with amusement at her dodging of what I had asked of her and then shook my head. "Nothing I can think of right now, but it might change," I replied. I extended my hand to her, and she looked down at it for a moment, still hesitating.

"It's only going to be for a few weeks," I reminded her. "Then we can move on. Right?"

"Right," she agreed, and she slipped her hand into mine. The moment our fingertips touched, I could feel the jolt of electricity rushing along my arm, as though we had closed a circuit and sent the energy coursing between both of us at once.

She pulled her hand away quickly. I knew she had felt it too. She would never have admitted to it, but she didn't need to. It was written all over her face.

This agreement we'd just come to? It was about to make my life a whole lot more interesting.

"Let's call them back, tell them we've made a decision," I said, and I got to my feet to pick up the phone and give them a call. I couldn't wait to get started now. All this energy was pulsing through my system, rushing through me like I was about to catch on fire on the spot. Was it the thrill of landing a new contract, or knowing I was about to be spending a whole lot more time with her? I didn't know yet. But I was looking forward to finding out.

I called reception to let them know we were ready, and Ian and the others turned up again a few minutes later. I knew they were going to be hyped when they found out we had come to an agreement, though of course they still didn't know about the past between us that had made it more complicated than it otherwise might have been. If we played our cards right, there would be no reason for them to find out. No reason for them to ever discover the truth of what had happened between us.

"We've made a decision," Morgan told them smoothly, taking the lead.

She wanted to be the one to deliver the news. She knew how good it made her look, and I wasn't going to try to elbow my way in.

"And?" Ian asked, his voice laced with a mix of nerves and excitement as he waited for us to share the news.

"We've decided to accept your offer," she told him, offering him a warm smile. Hard to believe she had been playing hard ball with me just a few minutes before. I guessed that was part of this business, being able to shift your mood and tone depending on who you were dealing with. She was clearly an expert.

"That's amazing news!" Ian exclaimed, and the other two leaned over to one another, beaming, muttering something to each other under their breath. "Please, I'd love to get started on everything today. Can I bring you down to my office to sign a couple of NDAs?"

"Sure," I replied. "I don't have any other plans. Does that work for you, Morgan?"

"Yes it does," she replied at once, not taking her eyes off of Ian. I could tell she was struggling not to meet my gaze, and I almost wanted to tell her she wouldn't burst into flames if she actually looked at me, but she was probably still doing her best to get a handle on the fact we were actually working together. I wasn't going to push her any more than I already had.

We followed Ian down to his office, and the two of us signed a stack of papers, promising the company we weren't going to try and flog any of their industry secrets to anyone else. Standard stuff. I noticed that Morgan was perusing every single page before she signed it, taking her time. It was probably the sensible choice, but a part of me wanted to tell her to get on with it. I didn't need to start snapping at her this soon into our tenure together, though. As long as we were in front of the KICKS reps, we had to present a united front, and I wouldn't let anything get in the way of it.

"Thanks, we'll get these filed by the end of the day," Ian told us once we were done, taking the papers from us and tapping them on the desk to get them into a neat pile. This office was already looking a lot fuller than it had before, the place now adorned with a few pictures of the shoes they had been working on, the brand deals they had managed to put together before we had come on board. I smirked. It wasn't going to be long till there was no damn space on this wall for him to show off all the achievements of this company, and I couldn't wait to be the one to get him there.

Well, me and Morgan, I guessed.

“We actually have a prototype of the new shoe ready for you to take a look at, if you’d like,” he offered. “I’m really excited to get it out on to the market.”

“We’d love to see it,” Morgan said. “I think it would be a big help with putting together this new campaign. Right, Jax?”

She was giving me the chance to show we were a united front, that the two of us were working on this together and were willing to put aside whatever petty differences we might have had to make this happen.

I nodded in agreement. “Sounds perfect.”

He led us down the corridor toward the display room, babbling the whole way about every detail of this new shoe. It was clear he was totally passionate about it, and honestly, that was a damn good thing. Hearing about it from him, with all this excitement and all this focus, would help inspire us, help us pick out the details that Ian clearly thought were the most important. Those were the factors we could build the campaign around. Even though he might not have realized how much information he was giving us right now, we had just been handed a huge pile of information about where his values and focus lay, and I wasn’t going to pass up the chance to use it.

Morgan walked beside me, and I snuck a look at her out of the corner of my eye. I was sure the guys would have plenty to say about me working with my ex, but I wasn’t about to worry about it, at least not yet. I could deal with their judgment when the time came. For now, the only thing I gave a fuck about was knowing I got to spend more time with her and I was looking forward to what was going to come from this new collaboration.

I was sure, with our minds put together, we would be able to come up with something incredible.

And then maybe get to the KICKS project, too.

CHAPTER 30



MORGAN

As I sat down at my desk, I let out a sigh and wondered how in the hell I was supposed to get through the next few weeks.

I was working with him. I had agreed to it. I hadn't even run it past Susan first. She'd heard about it when the KICKS reps had sent through the copies of my contract, and luckily, she had taken it well enough. She would have had every right to freak out on me, but she seemed to be enthused about the thought of taking on such a high-profile project. This morning would be the first day I spoke to her properly about it, beyond a quick email she'd dropped me the day before to confirm the news.

She came hurrying over to my desk as soon as my ass was in the seat, and I smiled up at her, hoping she wasn't going to be trying to pick my brain too deeply. I didn't have a whole lot for her, not yet. And I didn't want to talk too deeply about the guy I was going to be working with. I felt as though I was on the brink of having our previous relationship exposed, and the very last thing I needed was for the people I worked for to discover the truth about everything that had happened between us. They would have thought I was just using this as a chance to get close to him again, and it was anything but that.

Anything but that.

"So, you're all ready to get started for the day?" she asked me brightly as she arrived at my desk, leaning one elbow on the top of my cubicle.

I nodded. "I think so," I replied. "We'll probably just be running through some ideas today, nothing serious. I should be back at the office later today."

"Don't be silly. You go down there and work as long as you need to," she told me, waving a hand like she was dismissing the very thought of it

outright.

“I have stuff to take care of here, though,” I reminded her, hoping she was going to give me an out so I didn’t have to spend so much time with Jax. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to see him—I wanted to spend all the time with him I could—but I had to have an emergency exit button or else I was going to get lost to the partnership we had started as of yesterday.

“Don’t worry. I can stay on top of all of that for you,” she replied. “I’ll get Harriet and Paul to take care of your side of things.”

“It could be a while,” I warned her. “Weeks. Maybe even more than a month.”

“Morgan, you have to understand, this could be one of the biggest wins for our company,” she told me. “And for you. Think about the impact this could have on your career. I don’t want you to pass that up. And I don’t care how long it takes. I want it to be perfect by the time you put it out there. You’ll make sure of that for me, right?”

“I will,” I replied.

“And make sure it has our stamp on it,” she added. “Not just some version of whatever this guy wants you to do. Does he seem like he’s amenable to your ideas?”

“I think so,” I lied, even though I knew Jax was anything but. I was dreading going into the KICKS office today to see him, knowing we were going to have to try our best to overcome the differences in our approach and see things from the other’s perspective. Even when we had been dating, neither of us had been much good at that. We’d spent so many nights well into the morning in the midst of a lively debate, trying to change each other’s minds. This was a professional issue with both of our careers and reputations on the line. Yeah, I doubted it was going to be any easier.

“Good,” she replied, nodding. “You stand up for yourself, right? Don’t let him walk over you just because he’s from a bigger brand. I’m relying on you!”

And with that, she walked away. I grabbed my phone. I needed to get down to the KICKS offices and get started on this. The sooner I dove in, the sooner it would be done. And I wanted to be out of this sooner rather than later.

I texted him, and, of course, he got back to me to let me know he was already at the office. He sent me a shot of himself sitting at the table, waiting for me, and I cursed to myself silently. I hated being second to him. It made

me feel as though I wasn't as dedicated as I should have been, even though I knew I had worked just as hard as he had to get where I was.

I arrived at the KICKS office a half hour later and turned up at the door to the space they had put aside for us a little flustered, but as soon as I saw him, I took a deep breath and pulled myself together.

"Hey, Jax, good to see you," I told him, keeping my voice as neutral and confident as I could. "Looking forward to getting started on this project with you."

"Really?" he said, cocking an eyebrow and grinning at me with amusement.

I bristled but brushed it off. "Yes, I've got some ideas I'd like to run past you," I told him. "Have you had a chance to look over the pitch I've put together?"

"Yes, I saw it this morning," he replied. "Pretty impressive, I've got to say."

I smiled as I sat down opposite him, glad he seemed at least able to acknowledge when I had done a good job. "Thank you."

"For a social media campaign, I mean," he added.

"What does that mean?" I shot back.

"It's just one aspect of what the main campaign should be," he replied as though it should have been obvious. "Yes, we need to think about how we're going to be using social media, but at the same time, we need to think on a bigger scale. Traditional media. Brand partnerships."

"Social media is way bigger than traditional media these days," I pointed out. "And if you ignore that, you're just going to get yourself behind the times. People look for new products there. They feel as though they're getting advice from their friends on the best brands to go for. If we can place the shoes with a few big fitness influencers, we're in the door already."

"Yeah, and the only way we're going to be able to do that is by working with the big brands who have them all as partners," he replied. "That's how we get the legitimacy, sell it as something exclusive and exciting so we can get the buzz going around it. We're not going to be able to do that if everyone on every site has a pair of them, right? We need to make it look less attainable than that, at least for a while, so people are going to jump at the chance to buy them when the time comes. That's how you get sellouts on launch day."

I sighed, leaning back in my seat and staring at him. I knew he had a

point, but I wasn't going to let him push aside my ideas. I knew they were good. We were just approaching this from different perspectives, but it didn't mean either of us was wrong.

"You're not even going to consider what I'm putting forward?" I replied.

"I did consider it," he replied. "And it's good. I just think my approach is more comprehensive."

"Oh, do you now?" I replied. I could feel my cheeks getting a little heated. There was something about the way he looked at me when he was in this kind of mood, like he was challenging me, daring me. Nudging me toward saying something I knew I shouldn't. But I was smarter than that, especially now, especially on our first day here, and I wouldn't give him the right to ignore what I had to say. I brought to mind what Susan had told me, not to roll over and take anything he suggested just because he happened to be from a bigger business than the one I worked for. I was better than he gave me credit for, and I just needed him to see it.

"Okay, let's put that aside for now," I suggested. "We need to figure out what exactly we're trying to market about the shoe, regardless of how we decide to go about that, right? So let's start there."

My plan was to get him to suggest some details, and I would find a way to twist it to fit into my approach. I would show him how social media would be the best way to connect with people on that level. Then, it would feel more like his idea, and he would be more likely to go along with what I was suggesting. Not much, but it was something.

"You're right," he agreed.

"I could get used to hearing that," I joked, and he laughed. It was the first time he'd laughed since I arrived. I felt something in me start to relax, seeing him lighten up slightly.

"Well, don't," he replied. "I might have time to argue with you yet."

"We could go down and take another look at the prototype," I suggested. We'd already had a good amount of time getting to know it the day before, so I wasn't sure what good it would do, but not being alone in this room with him seemed like the right choice. When he looked at me, it was as though I was under the gaze of the sun, and it made me uncomfortable in a way I couldn't quite put into words.

"I don't think that's going to help," he replied, shaking his head. "We have to speak to consumers, right? To the kind of people who are actually going to buy something like this."

“How do you mean?”

“They’re active, and we have to be too,” he continued, sounding excited. “We have to get out there on the streets and speak to people to figure out what exactly they’re looking for when it comes to a shoe like this one. What other brands they buy from, what they’re doing in terms of advertising. It’s the best way to go about it, I’m sure.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” I agreed. Getting out of here, burning off some steam. Anything to give me a chance to breathe some fresh air and make sense of how we were going to move this project forward. And as much as I hated to admit it, I knew he had a point as well. It was a smart idea to get out and speak to the public. Sometimes, it was easy to forget how integral they were to all of this when you were hiding out in your office trying to stay on top of work. These were the people I was advertising to, and God only knew I was going to have to work my ass off to work out what the active crowd were into these days. I spent more time working out my mind than I did working out my body. It probably showed.

“Get your coat, we’re going,” he told me, and he pointed to the door like he was leading a polar expedition. I grinned, shook my head, and followed him out. Anything to get this over and done with.

CHAPTER 31



JAX

“Hello, we’re from KICKS, and I’d like to—”

“Not interested.” The guy who I was trying to flag down lifted a hand and shoved it in my face to get me to back off.

I fought the urge to snap at him for being so rude, but I knew it wasn’t going to get me any closer to my goal.

I turned to see Morgan hanging back, leaning against the wall on the busy New York street we had staked out to speak to potential customers. I called it guerilla market research, a chance for us to talk with everyone we needed to talk to. I didn’t hit the gym as much as I would have liked, especially not with how hard I had been working lately, and even when I did, I didn’t bother much with top-of-the-range shoes or clothes. For me, it was about getting in, getting a sweat on, and then leaving, not showing off my brand status.

Morgan lowered her head down to cover up the smirk that was inching over her lips at watching me be rejected for the hundredth time.

“What?” I demanded, practically daring her to just come out and say she thought I was doing a terrible job.

“Nothing, nothing,” she replied. “How many people have walked past you now?”

“Hey, that guy with the sneakers talked to me!” I protested, pointing down the street in the direction of the young guy with the too-white teeth who had wanted nothing more than to tell me every little detail of where he’d gotten his shoes from.

“To be fair, I think that guy would have talked to anyone about the shoes he was wearing. He was just looking for an excuse,” she said.

“Yeah, so he was perfect market research,” I replied. “I know I can get

someone else. I just need to keep trying.”

I tried to step in front of a young couple, but both of them just stared at me for a moment before they moved around me, as though they hadn't even seen me standing there. I sighed, feeling my shoulders begin to sag. In my head, this had been a great idea, but in reality, it was starting to get warm out here and I was beginning to wonder if I was wasting my time.

I should have known nobody was going to be in any kind of rush to stop and talk to me. This was New York, after all, and everyone always had places to be. They always wanted to be getting to their next destination sooner rather than later, and a person like me was just getting in the way of that. Maybe she would have more luck?

“You want to give it a go?” I asked her, and she shook her head.

“This was your idea,” she reminded me. “You should take the lead, don't you think?”

“I think people will be more willing to talk to a woman than some guy jumping out at them in the street,” I replied, and I jerked my head toward the crowd. “Come on, give it a go. Just once.”

She sighed, and I could tell this was the last thing she wanted to do. But she knew she had to seem willing as long as I was around, no matter how much she would obviously have preferred to hang back and watch me mess up over and over again. I was providing quality entertainment for her, after all.

“Sure,” she muttered, and she stepped forward, scanning the crowd until she found someone she liked the look of. Finally, she laid eyes on an older couple walking hand-in-hand together. The woman was laughing at something the man had said, her head thrown back and her other hand pressed to her chest as though she could barely contain the amusement.

“Hi, do you mind if I talk to you for a second?” Morgan asked.

I hung back, listening in to the conversation, trying to work out just what she was doing that seemed to have people far more willing to talk to her than me.

“Of course, sweetie,” the woman replied. “What's on your mind?”

“I know this might sound a little strange,” she began, smiling as though they were all in on a joke together. “But I wondered if you could tell me why you bought the shoes you're wearing now?”

“These ones?” The man twisted his foot back and forth as though he needed a moment to remind himself what he had put on that morning. “Oh,

because they're cheap, and they do the trick, and they're in my size."

Morgan laughed, and I shifted a little closer to her, hoping to join in on the conversation. She was doing a good job, but we needed more to work with.

"We're old. We don't put much thought into our shoes now," the woman added, shaking her head. "Just need another pair to see us out, don't we, Arnold?"

"See us out." He laughed, shaking his head. "You talk like we're on our deathbeds!"

"We might as well be, compared to these two!" the woman replied as she pointed between Morgan and me. Morgan glanced around, and I could see her face had lit up from the mood she had been in before. Talking to people seemed to be her forte, and I was glad to see her brightening up a little.

"Yes, I remember when we were that young," she said, nudging her husband. "Do you?"

"Barely." He chuckled. "It was so long ago now!"

"How long have the two of you been married?" I asked, seeing a chance for me to get in on the conversation instead of just standing at the sidelines.

"Nearly forty years now," the woman replied, and she gazed at her husband with a loving smile. It was clear how much affection they had for one another, and it honestly warmed my heart to see two people who cared about each other as much as they did.

"I don't even keep count anymore," the man said.

I raised my eyebrows at him. "Oh, really?"

"It doesn't seem to matter, not when I'm with her," he said as he turned to face his wife. His eyes seemed distant, even a little misty, as though there was so much he wanted to say but he didn't know quite how to put it into words.

"Everything comes and goes, money, work, friends, but she's always been there for me. Through all of it, she's the only thing I can never get out of my head," he explained. "I always come back to her."

"You're an old romantic, Arnold, underneath it all," she told him, shaking her head, but I could tell she was touched by the way he talked about her. How could she not be?

"But I'm sure the two of you know all about that," she said, glancing back to Morgan and me. She parted her lips to explain what our actual relationship was, but I cut her off before she could. If it made this old couple

happy to think we were some younger version of them, I wasn't going to try and contradict her.

"Well, thanks for your time," I told them.

"Yes, thank you, I think we have everything we need," she added, catching on to where I was coming from. She knew not to argue with people who'd just given us some insight into the market we were trying to corner, even if it was only to exclude their demographic from the approach.

"You two have a good day!" the woman called to us as they continued off, and Morgan lifted a hand to wave them off. I watched as they made their way down the street and then I turned to her.

"Well, that was kind of a bust," she said.

"Any information we didn't have before is good information," I told her, shaking my head. "Now we know what people their age are looking for. That's something, right?"

"Yeah, but I think we need to put our focus on the kind of people who are actually going to buy the shoes, not the kind of people who aren't," she said. She seemed a little more relaxed now, like the conversation had eased something in her mind.

"So get back out there and start talking," I told her, pointing to the crowd around us.

"Can I get a coffee or something first?" she replied, raising her eyebrows at me. "Maybe something with a double espresso shot?"

"Sure." I laughed. "You really need a caffeine hit after talking to just a couple of people?"

"Hey, at least I managed to get something out of them," she shot back, even though her voice was more playful than accusatory.

I held my hands up, conceding the point. "You got me there," I agreed. "So, where do you want to go for a coffee?"

"There's a place just around the corner from here," she told me. "They do good iced coffees. Let's go there."

I followed her, allowing her to lead the way. As we walked, she shook her head as she thought back to the encounter we'd just had.

"Isn't it strange they thought we were together?" she said casually. I was surprised she was even touching on that, I thought she would have wanted to pretend that part of the conversation had never happened.

"Yeah, weird," I agreed.

"I mean, we're clearly out here on business," she continued. "Unless they

think modern dating now involves market research.”

“Maybe they do,” I replied. She laughed. She seemed to have a little more of a spring in her step now, the brightness to her voice and tone much more obvious. I was glad I had suggested we get out of the office. It seemed to have done her a world of good.

“It was so sweet, what he said about her, wasn’t it?” she said as we arrived outside the coffee shop.

“Yeah, it was,” I agreed carefully. I got where he was coming from. Even after all those years apart, I still hadn’t been able to get Morgan out of my head. I could only imagine what it would be like to actually have your feelings returned by someone you felt that way about, how good it must have been to be able to just focus on being together instead of crushing down the emotions that seemed to rise up whenever they were around.

“They were so in love,” she sighed, almost a little wistful. Couldn’t she tell we were edging toward some dangerous territory? Did she just not care? Or was she nudging up against me to see if I would give anything away? We were still only a few weeks out from our hookup, after all, and the memories of that day were still fresh in my mind, even if they weren’t in hers.

“What do you want in your coffee?” she asked me brightly as though we hadn’t just been talking about something so serious. I didn’t know how she could just brush it off as though it was nothing but perhaps I needed to get on the same level. Maybe I needed to catch up with her approach to things, to stop letting myself get so caught up in the fact that couple had looked at us and seen some part of themselves there.

Had seen, maybe, some part of our past there, too. There had been a time when I had imagined the two of us like that, the two of us together the way that couple had been, long into our future, holding hands, laughing with each other, talking about our past and our present and our future as long as it meant we were together.

“Uh, whatever you’re having,” I replied, and I leaned back as I watched her order for us. She chatted with the barista, laughing at something she said, and I enjoyed the sound of her joy.

Because I got the feeling the rest of this project wasn’t exactly going to be overflowing with it, judging by how this first day had gone.

CHAPTER 32



MORGAN

As I finished typing up the report from the day we'd just spent working together, I stole another glance at him. His eyes were fixed on the screen ahead of him, and I wondered just what was going on inside his head.

Today had been a lot. There was no way to avoid it. A lot. Spending all that time with him, going out into the streets with him, getting to see him interacting with other people. I couldn't help but giggle a little at how useless he was at getting people to stop and talk to him, though I knew I should have been more sympathetic. A guy like him striding up to you in the street would have been enough to get anyone wondering what the hell was going on, wouldn't it?

But I'd actually had a lot of fun with him. And when that couple had said that we looked like they did when they were younger, it had sparked some remnants of feelings I thought I had long since put to bed.

And now, all I could think about was getting *him* into bed again. Shit, I had to get myself together. I was on the brink of losing control completely, and I knew I had to put it all to the back of my head if I was going to cope with working next to him for the next few weeks.

I closed my laptop. It was drawing up on the end of the day, and I needed to get some rest and head home. But if he suggested something else, I wasn't going to argue with him.

He glanced up at me and smiled. God, that smile, even after all this time, sent shivers down my spine. I couldn't help but smile back.

"I should get going," I told him. "I'm exhausted. We can work on this some more tomorrow, okay?"

"Sure," he replied, and he parted his lips like he was going to say

something else, but before he could, my phone started to ring.

I answered it quickly. "Hello?"

"Hi, Morgan, it's me," Haley said. "I'm heading out for dinner tonight at that Korean place you like. You want to come?"

My mouth was already watering at the thought of those spicy, cheesy rice cakes I loved so much. I nodded. "Sounds great. I just need to pack up over here. I'll be down in a half hour or so, alright?"

"See you then," she replied, and she hung up the phone.

"Sounds like you've got a date for the evening," Jax said. Was that a hint of jealousy in his voice? Maybe I just wanted it to be there, even though it shouldn't have bothered me either way.

"Just going out with one of my friends," I told him. "What were you going to say before?"

"Nothing," he replied, shaking his head. "You go out, have a good time. I'll see you back here tomorrow."

"Thanks." I got to my feet and started to gather my stuff. I could still feel him watching me, and I felt a tingle in my scalp as I wondered what he had been about to say to me.

It didn't matter. I had an out in going to see Haley, and I was going to take it. Better for me to forget about this and just focus on what I was doing next instead of trying to read into what was happening inside his head. I didn't want to let myself get distracted by him more than I already had been. It was way too easy for me to let my mind wander to everything I wanted to do with him, to him, and there was no way I was about to carry that over to seeing Haley. She would take one look at me and guess what was happening inside my head in an instant. She always did, no matter how well I felt like I hid it.

I made it out to Gimbap, our favorite Korean place, where she had already grabbed a table for us. She grinned and waved me over.

"Hey!" she told me brightly. "Thanks for coming out tonight. I know it's short notice."

"Oh, it's great to get out of the office," I told her.

She cocked an eyebrow as the waiter arrived with some water and our menus. "You're working with him now, aren't you?"

I nodded, wincing slightly. "Yeah, I am," I replied. "First day of it today, actually."

"And what did the two of you get up to?"

“Oh, you know, just trying to do some market research,” I replied casually, looking down at the menu in front of me. “We got out onto the street, asked some people about their shoe preferences.”

“How did it go?”

“It was...” I trailed off, planning to come up with something that would keep her from catching wind of the truth, but I knew there was no point. She would guess what was happening one way or another.

“It was actually kind of weird,” I admitted finally. “We ran into this older couple, and they told us that we were like them when they were younger.”

“Holy shit, no way,” she replied, eyes widening. “That must have been odd for you, given that you used to—”

“Yeah, exactly,” I replied. I had let myself wonder what a future might have been like for us at one time, thought about us as an old couple, giggling together over some shared inside joke.

“So how do you feel about him now?” she asked. “Now that you’re working together again, I mean.”

“I have no freaking idea,” I admitted, sighing. “I think I’m starting to feel something for him again, you know? Not that I want to. Not that I should be feeling anything for him. But everything we had, it’s not like you can just snuff it out like it’s nothing. I still want him.”

I paused. It was the first time I had said those words out loud, and the shock of them had caught me a little off guard. I did still want him. I wanted him badly, wanted him more than I could wrap my head around. It was making it hard to think straight.

“Maybe you could use that to your advantage,” she suggested, leaning forward and raising her eyebrows.

“How do you mean?” I asked, confused.

“I mean, you guys are going to come up against problems while you’re working together, aren’t you? It’s just bound to happen. It’s just a natural part of coming together on a project like this. But maybe you could, you know, come together in a different way?”

“Haley!” I exclaimed, but I couldn’t help but laugh at her suggestive idea. The thought of being with him again sent a shiver down my spine, the warm heat of it tempting. I couldn’t help but wonder what he had been about to ask me before and if it had been something about the tension we both felt.

“You know I’m right,” she said, shrugging. “Come on, you have to admit it could be fun, right? Even just if it was sex. You could blow off some steam

and you wouldn't be distracted by your feelings for him, not if you were doing something about it."

I sat back in my seat, pondering what she had just said to me. She had a point. As long as we were working together and as long as I was trying to shove down all the feelings as far as I could inside of me, it was going to be tough for me to work with him. If we slept together, maybe even just one time, it could be enough to get that part of things out of my head and allow me to stay focused on the job at hand.

"I guess you could be right," I replied, and she nodded enthusiastically.

"If you're going to be stuck working with him anyway, why not make the most of it?" She spread her hands wide and raised her eyebrows. "It would make things much simpler. And by the sounds of it, it's like the two of you both want it, too."

"I don't know if he does," I confessed, and she rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Trust me, he does." She laughed. "He wants you. The two of you wouldn't have hooked up the last time if he didn't want anything to do with you."

"Yeah, of course," I murmured. Maybe I was just searching for an excuse to do this, an excuse to indulge in the feelings I knew I shouldn't have had for him. Or maybe she was right. This was how I should have been dealing with it. It was the smart way to go about it, to be upfront about the feelings I had for him and use it as a way to cut through our professional tension. If today was anything to go by, then I knew there was going to be a lot of it.

"And it means you're going to stop coming out to dinner with me with that look on your face like you can't stop thinking about him," she teased.

I grinned. "Is it that obvious?"

"Girl, it's written all over your face!" she exclaimed. "I'm surprised everyone at your office hasn't figured it out, too. You're not exactly being subtle about it."

"God, I hope they haven't," I groaned. "That's the last thing I need, people gossiping about the two of us."

"I guarantee you it's already happening," she told me, shaking her head. "I mean, I haven't seen the two of you together, but if this is anything to go by?" She gestured to me, sitting there in front of her. "Then they've already figured it out. Come on, let's order something, I'm starving."

We went through the menu, pretending like we weren't going to pick out

the usual table-groaning stacks of food we always did, and soon enough, we were feasting on a variety of dishes and sipping on *soju* to go with it. I was glad to have the distraction from everything going on at work, and more than anything, I was glad she had given me permission to do what I had already been thinking about in the first place.

Was it dangerous? Probably. But we had agreed to do this project together, so we were going to be spending the next few weeks together. Maybe even longer. I could use this attraction to my advantage. We were going to disagree on plenty, and when those issues came up, we could just use what we had to break them down. Much easier to get him to see things from my perspective when he was between my legs.

“You’re thinking about him again, aren’t you?” Haley asked, pointing an accusatory chopstick in my direction.

I smiled, a little embarrassed. “Yeah, is it that obvious?”

“You couldn’t make it more blatant if you tried,” she replied with a grin. “You need to start sleeping with this guy, honestly. You’ll feel way better once you’ve gotten him out of your system. Or back into it.”

I laughed. Maybe it was just the alcohol, but I felt this light, bubbly excitement coursing through my veins. I couldn’t wait to see him again. I didn’t know how I was going to put this idea forward or if he was going to even think about going for it, but if he did, then I would be able to work out all of the tension I had been holding all this time.

And I wanted nothing more than to indulge myself in a little more of our passion.

CHAPTER 33



JAX

“Morgan, hi,” I said as I ran my hand through my hair, surveying the chaos in front of me.

“Hey, Jax, where are you?” she replied. “I’m at the office already.”

“I have to deal with something at work; something with the guys,” I told her. “I’m sorry. Can you catch me up on everything later?”

“Everything okay?” she replied, and I was surprised to hear genuine concern in her voice.

“Everything’s fine,” I assured her. “Just some shit I need to take care of. Sorry to let you down.”

“No, don’t worry about it,” she replied. “Maybe we could, uh, meet for dinner tonight? I can fill you in then?”

I was a little surprised to hear her suggest it, but no way was I going to turn her down. “I’d love that.”

“I’ll text you the address of the place later, okay? Hope you can handle everything down there.”

“I will,” I replied, and we said our goodbyes and I hung up the phone. Planting my hands on my waist, I looked around, shaking my head.

“What the hell happened here?” I asked nobody in particular.

“We wanted to see if we could get a whole toilet roll to flush,” Derrick replied as though it should have been obvious.

I tapped my foot into the gargantuan puddle in front of me, trying to work out how deep it was. Not quite enough for anything to go swimming but not far from it. They had flooded the bathroom and we couldn’t get anything done until we got it cleared up.

No point scolding them or trying to get them to see what a stupid idea this

was. I knew it wouldn't have gotten through to them, and it was easily something I could have seen myself doing too. Sometimes, you just had to answer some burning question, even if you had never even thought of it before that day, and flushing a whole roll was the question they had decided to find an answer to this morning. Gives a whole new meaning to boys being boys.

"What are we going to do?" I asked as everyone emerged from their offices to look at the damage.

"It doesn't look too bad," Max said. "And it's only on tiled floor in the men's bathroom, so we could probably just sweep it back toward the showers and get it to drain."

"Yeah, there's a big window squeegee thing in the cleaning closet," Seb added. "We could use that to push the water back where it needs to go."

"Good idea," Spencer replied, snapping his fingers and nodding. "You go get that. I'll prop open the door so we can move the water, okay?"

The guys sprang into action, and I joined them. Soon enough, we were sweeping the water out of the hall and down toward the drain. It took a few attempts to get it all done, but the majority of the water had vanished, leaving us with just the glistening remains on the surface.

"Okay, there has to be a mop somewhere, right?" Graham said. "We can clean the place up. Save the cleaners a job this evening."

"Isn't that what we pay them for?" Seb asked.

"Yeah, not for taking care of Derrick's bright ideas." Max laughed. "It won't take long if we all get involved. Come on."

Soon, we were all scrubbing the place down. I was glad I had a change of clothes in the office because my suit pants were ruined, and I knew I couldn't go out to dinner with Morgan looking like this.

Dinner. My heart skipped a beat as I thought of it. Seeing her again tonight, even just for a while, was something I could hardly wait for. I loved being with her, and after yesterday, I felt as though something had shifted between us. It was something I couldn't quite put into words. Something I wished I could say out loud.

I went to grab my spare clothes and sighed when I saw they were missing. I was going to have to head home and get changed instead. And by the time I got there, showered, and changed into my new clothes, I was probably going to be running late for dinner. I dialed her number as I made my way out of my office.

“Hey, Morgan,” I greeted her.

“You get everything handled?” she asked me. I could hear the smile in her voice as she spoke, probably glad she wasn’t the one having to deal with a disaster like that one. She likely didn’t work with the same kind of idiots I did, even if I was way too fond of them to get mad at the stunts they sometimes pulled.

“I did,” I replied. “But I need to go home and shower and change. You want to come to my place to catch me up on everything?”

She paused for a moment, and I wondered if I had overstepped a line. Surely, going for dinner alone would have been enough to take us out of the strictly professional zone, wouldn’t it? It couldn’t be that much more of an issue for me to ask her around to my place instead, just for us to spend some time together.

“Yeah, that’s no problem,” she agreed. “Text me your address, okay?”

“I will,” I replied, and I felt a little rush of excitement in my stomach. So, we were going to be alone together. Just the two of us. I had no idea where her mind was with all of this or whether it was the same place my head was at, but I hoped it was.

Once I was sure the bathroom had been cleaned enough not to burden the service workers with getting it back up to scratch—and once I had made sure the guys weren’t going to pull some other experiment as soon as I walked out the door and headed for the car—I pulled away and started toward home. I hadn’t told any of them what I was planning for the night, and I had no intention of doing so. They would judge me, and the last thing I wanted was for anyone to catch onto me spending more time with Morgan, especially after all of them had told me to keep my distance. But how the hell was I meant to do that when she was just so damn tempting?

I arrived back at my place and made my way to the shower. I needed to blow off some steam before she got here, or I was going to be a mess when she walked through the door. Even just the thought of having her all up in my personal space like this was enough to get my mind heading a whole lot of different directions, and I knew I couldn’t expect anything from her. Just because we had hooked up before didn’t mean we were going to again, and I wasn’t going to come into this with any expectations. It was better that way, easier to make sure I didn’t get let down.

I laid out the clothes I was planning on changing into and stepped underneath the cool rush of water in my shower. Closing my eyes, I let it

course over me, focusing on the way it felt, on the caress of it against my skin, just like her fingers had done when we were together.

Shit! I was already getting carried away, distracted by what I should have been able to control. It was always the same when it came to her. Every logical thought inside my head went out the window, and all I could think about was everything I knew I shouldn't have wanted to do.

We were working together now. All the more reason to control myself. If I did something, said something that she didn't like, it was going to make things ten times more awkward between us, and they were already pretty damn tough as it was. She must have been able to tell how I felt about her, but she was pretending in every way she could that she didn't notice.

As though she could have missed it.

I closed my eyes and let the water rush down my body, scrubbing myself clean. I had already texted her my address, and she was likely already on her way over now. And this was just about work. That was what she had said to me, but the thought of her all up in my space was getting me hot and bothered. I could invite her right back to the bedroom, just skip all the formality of actually having to talk with each other when I knew there was one thing on our minds and one thing only.

But before I could let myself go too far down that path, the buzzer went off, and I let out an annoyed groan. I wasn't done showering yet, but I didn't want to leave her standing at the door while I got dressed.

I stepped out of the shower and reached for a towel, wrapping it around my waist quickly. I checked in the mirror to make sure too much wasn't on display and then headed for the door. I hoped she wouldn't be freaked by seeing me so undressed. It wasn't like she hadn't seen plenty of it before, but still.

I arrived at the door and paused before I opened it. I could have just run upstairs, left her to wait, and thrown some clothes on, but maybe there was a part of me that wanted to see how she was going to react. If she just looked away and acted all embarrassed by it, then I would know there was nothing else going on here. But if she didn't?

I opened the door. There she was, standing on the other side, laptop bag slung over one shoulder, messenger on the other.

"Hey," I greeted her. "Sorry. I just got out of the shower. Come on in."

But before I could say anything else, she took a step toward me, dumped her bags on the floor, and kissed me.

As soon as our lips met, I let go of the towel, wrapping my arms around her and pulling her in close. I wasn't sure why this was happening or how long I had before she came to her senses and pulled away, but I didn't give a damn. Not now. Not when she felt this fucking good.

She moaned against my lips and put her hands around my waist, letting her nails trail over the small of my bare back. I could already feel myself getting hard, all the want I'd had for her all this time rising up to consume me. I didn't have to hide it, not anymore, not now that she was here. Not now that I knew she wanted me too.

"Take me to bed," she told me, her lips carving out the words against mine so I could feel them as well as hear them, as if I needed to be told twice.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward my bedroom. I could hear her breathing coming hard and fast, a sign of how much she needed this, a sign of how much she needed me. And now, finally, I didn't have to pretend I felt anything other than the exact same way about her. I didn't have to try and control my desire, my want, my need.

I could finally have her. And I was going to enjoy every second of it.

CHAPTER 34



MORGAN

He guided me to the bed and climbed on top of me, letting me feel the full weight of his strong, naked body on mine.

I honestly hadn't been planning it like this. But as soon as I had laid eyes on him like that, bare-ass naked in front of me with nothing but a towel to cover himself up, how in the hell was I meant to ignore it?

I had known it was a risk, coming to his house like this. I had hesitated when he had suggested it, not sure if I was going to land myself in more trouble than it was worth, but I wasn't going to just pounce on him the second I saw him, right? I could control myself, couldn't I?

At least, that was what I had told myself right up until the moment I'd seen him and I'd dropped all my inhibitions to leap on him right then and there.

He was already stripping me down, getting me good and naked, just like he was. I couldn't help but feel him up, sliding my hands all over his body, admiring the strength of it. He was seriously ripped, and I had no idea how he found the time for the gym considering what he did for work. I didn't care, though. All I cared about was having him all to myself, and I was going to make the very best of it I could. I didn't know if my inhibitions would ever drop away like this again, and since we were already in bed, I was going to indulge myself in every little fantasy I'd been having about the two of us since the last time we'd hooked up.

"Fuck, I've wanted this for so long," he breathed into my ear as he pushed up my skirt and pulled down my panties. He was already hard, proving what he'd just told me.

I loved knowing he had been thinking about this as much as I had,

craving it as badly as I had. Neither of us could hold back now that we were here, and it felt like a relief to finally give in and let the feelings get the better of us. This desire we had, we couldn't push it down no matter how hard we tried, no matter what we did to hide from it. It was always going to find some way to come out, and I was relieved not to have to pretend any differently anymore.

I wrapped my legs around him after I had kicked my panties off, grinding my bare pussy against him. His hardness was intoxicating to me, a sign of how much he wanted me. I loved knowing that, knowing he had to have me, had to make me his. And I wasn't willing to wait any longer to take advantage of it.

"Fuck me, Jax, please," I begged him. I could still remember how crazy those words drove him when we had first been together, when he'd heard me plead for his cock to be inside of me, and judging by the growl of pleasure he let out in response, that hadn't changed.

He didn't need telling twice as he wrapped up in a condom that I didn't even see where it came from. He wrapped his hand around his cock and guided it against me, letting me feel the hardness of the tip against my slit as he rubbed it up and down a few times. Then, at last, he pushed inside me, and both of us moaned in pleasure in the same instant.

"Mmm," I purred as his fullness made my head spin. He felt incredible inside me, always had, but this was something else. Knowing how taboo it was just turned me on more.

I wrapped my legs around him, hooking my ankles around his back and lifting my hips so I could grind up against him. I wanted to feel every inch of him, every part of him, every bit of him I could. Sliding my hands down, I sank them into his ass to push him in even deeper, and he gave me everything I needed.

We held on to each other tight as he fucked me, filling me in long, hard strokes that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. It was like we were finally working out all the tension we had been holding between us since the last time we'd hooked up, every bit of lust and desire we had done our best to ignore.

I could already feel the orgasm growing inside me, and he shifted so that he was grinding up against my clit with every thrust. He knew just what he was doing, could remember exactly what it took to get me over the edge and into the release I craved so badly. Nobody did it like him. Nobody could even

come close. I panted against his mouth, reaching out my tongue to meet his as he pushed my thighs back so he could move even deeper into me.

I could hardly take any more of him, but I couldn't bring myself to stop either. I needed to go over the edge and into my orgasm. I needed it badly, and I could tell from the little pants he was letting out with every thrust that he was right there with me. Both of us were drawing in, moving in closer to the edge, as he continued to fuck me, his cock sliding deep into my pussy. I kissed him again, planting my lips against his, and I could feel him moan against my mouth. I loved knowing I was turning him on so much, that I still had the capacity to drive him crazy just the same way I did before.

Soon, I felt his cock twitching inside me as he went over the edge and into his release. His body sank into mine, the tension beginning to leak from his system, and I felt myself come in the same moment, the sheer thrill of turning him on that much getting me over the edge. I gasped as the pleasure took over me, my pussy clenching around him tightly, our mouths still hungry for each other as his hands traced gently over my body.

He held himself there for a long moment before he pulled back, falling away from me and landing on the bed next to me with a long sigh of relief. I could tell from the look on his face that he'd wanted it as much as I had, maybe more, and knowing we had finally broken down that boundary was a weight off my shoulders.

We both lay there for a moment, catching our breath, and then he turned to face me. He was sprawled across the bed, totally naked, and I had to admit it was hard not to get distracted by the sight of him there, looking so damn sexy, his body strong and toned, just as I remembered it. He'd always used working out as a way to blow off steam, and it looked like it was serving him just as well as it ever had. I reached out and ran my hand over his chest, feeling the pounding of his heart beneath his skin.

"What was that for?" he asked me as he covered my hand with his. "Not that I'm complaining, of course."

"Because I needed to get it out of my system," I told him. It was the truth. No way could I have kept on working with him if I hadn't been able to just pounce on him at last and finally do what I had been trying to hold back from all this time.

He chuckled. "Well, trust me. You ever want to get that out of your system again, I'm right here for you," he said and grinned at me. His face looked softer than before, almost younger, as though we had just managed to

reel back the years and pick up where we had left off.

I could still remember all those times we had blown off our plans for the weekend and just spent it together, in bed, like this, the two of us wrapped up in each other, like the rest of the world didn't exist and we were the only things that mattered. Sometimes, I missed those simpler times when everything made a hell of a lot more sense, even if it was way less productive.

“Good to know,” I replied, dodging saying anything more specific. I didn't want to come out and tell him how much I wanted to do this again. It seemed too dangerous, too close to the bone to admit to something like that. If I said I wanted to do this again, then it would be the beginning of a relationship, if that was even the right word. It would be more than what we'd had before, and that seemed more than I was willing to commit to right now.

“So what happened with you today?” I asked, shifting the subject to something a little less loaded.

“What do you mean?” he replied, frowning as though he'd forgotten he hadn't been able to make it into work that day.

“I mean, you said something happened at your office?” I reminded him.

He laughed. “Shit, I completely forgot about that,” he said, and he smoothed my hair back from my face. “Guess that's just the effect you have on men.”

I giggled. I loved hearing him talk that way about me. We'd always had amazing sexual chemistry, but I was glad to know it had survived into the here and now, too. The two of us, together, we just made sense. We always had, even from when we first got together. Neither of us had been particularly experienced back then, but we hadn't needed to be. When it came to the two of us, we just worked well together. We just needed each other to get off, not any fancy tricks, not any crazy kinks. Just us.

“So what exactly went down in your office?” I asked.

He sighed and shook his head. “You won't believe it. A couple of the guys I work with, they wanted to see if they could flush a whole damn toilet roll down the toilet.”

“What?” I busted out laughing, hardly able to hold myself back. He had to know how ridiculous it sounded.

“I know, I know,” he replied, shaking his head. “I couldn't believe it either. But we didn't want to leave it for the cleaners to deal with. I think

because they would have had to explain what was actually going through their minds when they did it if they waited for that.”

I laughed, and he filled me in on the rest of the story. I loved listening to him talk, not about the work we were doing together but just talking. Filling me in on what was happening with his life. It felt like old times, the times when we'd been together back in the day, the times when we had shared every little detail of what had gone on in our lives with each other because we were the only people we wanted to share all of that with. It just felt right back then to give him everything I had, even the stuff that might have seemed trivial to anyone else. He always listened like he couldn't think of anything more important.

As I lay there, I let the rest of the day just fall away. I took in what he was saying and draped an arm across his chest, leaning on it so I could watch him while he spoke. I knew there were more important things we should have been talking about, but as we chatted and I asked a few questions about his dilemma at the office, it was like the KICKS contract and everything else were a million miles away from the two of us in his bed.

I knew it couldn't stay that way but I would enjoy it while I could.

CHAPTER 35



JAX

When I arrived at the facility the next day, I felt like I was walking on damn air.

I couldn't believe what had happened the night before. Morgan and I had spent the whole evening together in bed, fooling around, hooking up, and doing everything I couldn't wait to repeat the moment I got the chance.

She had headed home early this morning, telling me she wanted to shower and change before she headed into the office. I couldn't blame her. After everything we'd been up to, it probably would have been written all over our faces, and I didn't want anyone at work to know what had been going on.

I still wasn't sure exactly what had tempted her to do that with me, but hell, I wasn't going to complain. Not when I actually had her to myself again, not when I had her in my bed. I didn't know if we were ever going to repeat that, but I got the feeling we would. It had been way too much fun for us to just do once, I was sure of it, and, judging by how much she had enjoyed it too, I knew she felt the same way.

She had gotten into the office a little before me, and she glanced up from the desk as soon as she heard me come in. The briefest little hint of a smile crossed her lips before she could stop herself, as though she was thinking back to everything we had done the night before. I knew how she felt.

"Hey," she greeted me, her voice a little shaky. I wished I could just pull her into my arms and kiss her right then and there without giving a damn who saw or who knew, but I had to be smarter than that. I took a seat at the table.

"Hey," I replied, grinning. I couldn't quite manage to keep the smile off my face, not when she was looking at me like that, not when I could

remember how gorgeous she had looked on top of me the night before.

“So, let me catch you up on what I was doing yesterday,” she told me. “I think I have an approach that’s going to take both of our preferences into account.”

She started to run through everything with me, and I took it all in, nodding as she pulled out some papers she had been working on the day before. She had clearly put in a serious shift, finding a way to blend her social media approach with my more traditional one. Her idea was to use social media to create buzz before the big splash in traditional media, so people would already have an idea of what they were dealing with before we went national with this release. It would take a while, but it would give the impression of a more organic swell of support for the brand as opposed to people just attempting to cram it down their throats, which usually got a better response overall.

“I like this,” I told her, nodding. “I think it’s smart. People aren’t going to feel like they’re being marketed to, and that’s always the best way to get this kind of thing out there, especially since we’re aiming at a younger market.”

“Exactly,” she replied, her face lighting up. “Shit, I think that might be the first time you’ve agreed with me on anything to do with this.”

“Hey, maybe I’m feeling a little more open than normal after last night,” I said, my lips curling up into a smile.

Her cheeks flushed slightly. “We can’t talk about that in here,” she protested, but she was giggling. I loved making her laugh. Nothing made me happy like seeing her feeling free.

“I know, I know,” I murmured, and I slipped my hand onto her knee beneath the table. “I just can’t stop thinking about it.”

“Me neither,” she replied, her eyes lifting to meet mine. She looked so damn appealing in that instant, it took everything I had not to lean across the table and kiss her.

“But we need to keep focused. I want to get this done,” she told me, shifting away from me slightly, putting some much-needed distance between us. It was hard enough to think straight with her right there in front of me, let alone when she was telling me it was on her mind as well.

“You’re right,” I replied. “I’d like to get some photos to come up with a general idea to pass on to the art department here, for when we start out the campaign. You feel like taking a day trip?”

“Sure,” she replied, her eyes lighting up at the thought.

I was glad she agreed because I had already pulled some strings to get us in somewhere special. Yes, part of it was so we could get some pictures to come up with a concept for the ad campaign, but really, I just wanted to show off to her a little. When we had first been together, I hadn't had access to the same kind of cash and influence I did now, and maybe there was a part of me that wanted to spoil her, show her just how good she could have it when the two of us were together.

We packed up our stuff, and I called us a cab to take us downtown toward the river. It was a bright day, a little cold, but clear—perfect for what I had planned.

The car pulled up outside the tourist attraction, and Morgan looked up at it and then pouted at me playfully.

“The Statue of Liberty?” she said. “You know I’ve already been here. You couldn’t plan a little field trip to somewhere new?”

“Trust me, it’s not going to be like any other time you’ve visited.” I paid the cab fare and opened her door for her.

She took my hand for balance as she stood up, and God, even that gentle, passing touch was enough to make the hairs on the back of my neck stand up. I felt like everyone around us must have been able to tell how much I wanted her. Maybe it didn’t even bother me if it was true.

“Really?” she replied, and it was almost as though she was daring me to impress her. I loved this side of her, this side of her that was always looking for the next big thing, the next thing to make her life that little bit more interesting.

Of course, little did she know we would be seeing a side to this place hardly anyone else ever had the chance to. The place was bustling with tourists already, most of them posing over by the railings to take pictures next to the glistening river below. The sun was bouncing off the water perfectly, picking out the shimmering blues and silvers in the glossy waves below.

I had spoken to George this morning to see if he could get us into where I wanted to go. I wasn’t sure he was going to agree with it at first, but he owed me a favor. We had helped out him and his family in keeping hold of their house when they had been in a financial bind, one of Derrick’s rare pro-bono cases, and he had told us that if we ever needed anything from him, he would do everything he could to make it happen.

With him working as a guard at the Statue of Liberty, I hadn’t imagined there was going to be much I might need to call upon him for, but when she

had slipped away this morning, my mind had started turning, trying to come up with the most impressive thing I could give her.

I knew she was a hardened New Yorker by now, and she had probably gone past the statue a hundred times on her way to work already. Probably glanced at it out of the corner of her eye, not much more. The two of us had gone a couple of times when we had been dating, mostly because it was a cheap date. We'd eat ice cream down by the river and people-watch the crowds of tourists rushing by, all of them going so fast they hardly had time to take any of it in. It had felt like our own little pocket of sanity in the middle of this mad, sometimes overwhelming world, and it was that feeling I wanted to give her again.

But now, I could pull it off with a little more style. As we made our way toward the base of the statue, George stepped out, lifting a hand to greet me. He was in a crisp uniform, and he looked a lot less haggard than the last time I had seen him. I guessed that was what the pressure of money worries would do to you.

"Good morning," he greeted us, and I nodded back. Morgan stole a glance at me, clearly confused as to what was going on.

"What is this?" she asked me, cocking an eyebrow as we headed toward the building.

"You'll see," I replied. We followed George into the main entrance, and then he unlocked a door that led to a back room, away from the crowds of people. I could see a few of them glancing our way, probably wondering what we had done to earn such special treatment, but I ignored them. She was the only thing I cared about right now, the only thing I wanted to focus on.

George dialed a few buttons on a keypad behind the door, and elevator doors slid smoothly open in front of us. George stepped aside and gestured for us to enter.

"Right this way."

I could tell Morgan was close to bursting with the sheer confusion of what was going on here, but that was the point. I wanted this to be the kind of surprise she would never in a million years have been able to guess. When it came to impressing her, I knew I had to pull out all the stops, and I wanted to give her something I was sure nobody else in the city would have been able to, no matter how hard they tried.

We rode up in the sleek elevator, and George slipped a key into a lock underneath the keypad before pressing some more buttons to take us to the

very top of the statue. The view was going to be incredible, especially on a day like this. Nothing like what we had seen before when we had come to this place all those years ago.

Finally, the doors slid open at the top of the elevator shaft, and Morgan hung back for a moment, looking up at me as though she was waiting for permission.

“Go ahead,” I told her, gesturing for her to take the lead.

She stepped out of the elevator, and as she saw the view laid out below us, her lips parted, eyes widened.

Exactly what I had been hoping for.

CHAPTER 36



MORGAN

I stood there in front of the enormous glass viewing platform and stared down at the view below me. There was no way this could be real. It looked like something out of a movie.

I glanced around to see Jax stepping out of the elevator behind me, and the guy who had let us up here was heading back down to give us some privacy. I was still trying to wrap my head around how he had managed to get us up here, and what exactly we were doing here. When he had said something about a day trip, this was the last thing I had imagined.

“What do you think?” he asked me softly.

I shook my head. “It’s incredible up here,” I murmured.

It felt like the two of us were towering over the city, the people scattered below us nothing more than ants crawling around the streets. All the tourists we’d had to push through to get to where we were now were a million miles away, or at least that was how it felt.

“That was the idea,” he said, and he pulled out his phone and snapped a picture of me gazing out over the river below. The sun was bouncing off the water, the shimmer of it like something out of a vacation commercial.

“What are you taking a picture of?” I asked him, glancing around and smiling.

“Your face,” he replied. “And the view. This is exactly what I wanted. Something that nobody else could get.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“This is what I want to use as the basis for our campaign,” he explained. “This view of the city. It’s something not many people will be able to get, right? That’s the same kind of energy we want to bring to the campaign, that

feeling that they have something that the rest of the world doesn't have access to."

I smiled. It was a good idea. I wasn't sure he had needed to bring me all the way up here to prove it, but I wasn't going to complain. It reminded me of those dates we'd had when we had been together in college. Did he remember those, or was bringing me here nothing more than a coincidence?

"Yeah, I like that," I agreed. "Here, give me your phone. Let me get some photos."

I snapped a few more as I looked down over the city, the skyline practically sparkling in the sunshine. I could already imagine how we would use these images to get people to see New York through new eyes. Plenty of people would jump on that. The city itself was already marketing gold, a perfect way to sell this idea of a cool, must-have product, but this? This was something else entirely.

I dropped the camera once more and took another look at the city before I handed the phone back to Jax and started to question him.

"How exactly did you get us in here in the first place?" I asked him. "You know the guy who works here or something?"

"Yeah, we met because we were helping him out with some legal stuff," he replied. "We know a lot of people in the city through work. Could probably get you in just about anywhere."

I grinned and turned to the window once more. Being up here felt so damn peaceful, as though we were removed from the rest of the world, up in this space that existed just for the two of us. In all the stress of the last few weeks, I felt relief at being able to let go for a moment and just focus on this peace, this moment between the two of us.

"This is a game-changer for both of us, Morgan," he said. "The deal with KICKS, I mean. I want to make sure we do everything we can to make the most of it."

"Agreed," I replied with a nod. I knew it just as well as he did. We had to take every chance we could to make this happen, no matter how far we had to go, no matter how out of the box we had to take this.

"I wanted you to see how much I meant that," he continued, a small smile passing over his face as he looked down at me.

A shiver rushed down my spine. Was this just about the work? Or was there something more to this, too? I couldn't help but wonder. I almost wanted to ask him, but I didn't want to ruin this moment, this incredible

feeling between us right now.

“So, how exactly did you get to know that security guy?” I asked him, shifting the subject so I could focus on something a little less emotional.

“Oh, we helped him out with some financial issues he was having,” he explained. “One of the guys I run the company with, he’s a lawyer, and he did what he could to make sure he didn’t lose his place.”

“That’s amazing,” I said. “I didn’t realize you did that kind of work, you know, helping people.”

“Yeah, it’s not our main focus,” he replied, grinning. “I mean, got to make money, right? But sometimes, I guess we get a fit of conscience, and we decide to do something actually useful for a change.”

The conversation turned to the business he helped run with a few other guys. It sounded as though he had done seriously well for himself, and I would have been lying if I said I wasn’t impressed hearing about how far he had come and how much he had done. I’d always known he’d had the drive to succeed, but he had taken that and turned it into some serious profit and influence around the city.

When he chatted about where he was planning to take the business next, it was clear how important KICKS was to him. In my head, with his confidence, I’d assumed he already knew what he was doing and had already made it, but his passion and focus told me there was still so much more he wanted to do.

Like me, he had big dreams. Big dreams for where he wanted to take his career, big dreams for what he was going to do as soon as he got the money and power to do it. He wanted to make a difference in the city, strike out and invest in some businesses to help them get off the ground.

“I know how tough it can be when you have to put in all the work yourself and nobody’s there who’s got your back,” he explained. “I can be that for someone. I hope.”

I couldn’t help but smile, hearing him say that. He wanted to actually help people. It was more than could be said for a hell of a lot of people in this industry. Most of them were just out for themselves, out for what they could get in any way they could get their hands on it. Normally, they tried to cloak that under the mask of actually giving a damn about others, but I could tell from the way he spoke he really meant it when he said it.

“I want to have my own business one day,” I confessed to him. This wasn’t something I said out loud to many people, not if I could avoid it. It

always just felt far too dangerous to confess to how much I wanted this, how far I planned to take my career if I got the chance. Sometimes, I tried not to let my mind stray down that path for fear I wouldn't be able to make it happen for myself, but when I was with him, standing here, on top of the whole damn world, I knew there was nothing I couldn't handle, nothing I couldn't risk. Like we were in a little bubble above the whole universe, and anything I said here would stay here.

"Really?" he replied, eyes brightening with interest.

"Yeah, so I can help more women getting into this industry," I explained. "I want to make it so they never have to feel like they're *less than*, the way I have."

"You really felt like that?" he replied, sounding surprised.

I nodded. I didn't want to admit it, but I could be honest with him, here. "Yeah, I was always worried I wouldn't be good enough to stack up to the guys around me," I replied, shaking my head. "It felt like, every turn I took, there was a guy with less experience and more confidence who took it right out from underneath me."

"That must have driven you crazy," he said.

I sighed and nodded. "You have no damn idea," I muttered. "It always felt like I wasn't good enough. No matter what I did, there would always be someone there to undercut me. Some guy who would get in with the good old boys and they would hire him over me every time, because they didn't want some broad around the office, you know?"

"And that's what you want to help other women with?" he asked.

I nodded. "Yeah, I think so many companies want to pretend that kind of stuff doesn't exist, but it does. And the only way we can put it right is if we acknowledge it and do something about it. I can make it happen. I know I can."

"I know you can," he echoed after me, and the way he looked at me, I knew he believed me. When he looked at me, I could see it in his eyes, as though he wanted nothing more than to see me succeed in any way I could.

We talked for what felt like an hour about what we were planning for the future—our goals, our dreams, the big shots we felt like we might never get but we had to try for anyway. It felt like the old days, when we would just bounce ideas off each other, talk late into the night about everything we wanted to achieve and how we were going to get there. When I was with him, I always felt like I could take on the world, and it seemed like, now that we

were working together again, I was right back where I had started, believing I was capable of anything when he was by my side.

Eventually, though, he glanced at his watch and pulled a face.

“We should probably get going,” he said. I sighed.

“Can’t we stay here a little longer?” I asked, peering down over the view below. The sun was really starting to hit the city now, lighting it up, and from above, it was as though someone had flicked on a shimmering set of fairy lights across the whole of New York.

“I’d love to, as well, but I don’t want to land George in trouble,” he reminded me.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I agreed. “Besides, we should get back to the office, right?”

“Yeah, they’re probably wondering what we’ve been doing spending so long away from the office,” he said.

“This counts as work, doesn’t it?” I said, shrugging. “We got some pictures to show to the art department. I think that should count.”

“I totally agree,” he replied. “But we don’t want to push our luck. We’ve only been there a few days.”

I nodded, but as we made our way for the elevator and called George to bring us back down, there was only one part of what he said sticking in my head—we. He talked about us together like that, and it made my heart happy. After all the stress that had brought us to this moment, all the tension as we had been working against each other, there was a peace and a comfort in hearing him speak about us like that, as though we were a team.

We were, for now, at least. I didn’t know how long it was going to last, our time working together, but I wanted to enjoy every single second of it while I still could. Because it made me feel comfortable, happy, in a way nearly nothing else did. This time we’d spent together in this viewing platform, it had given me a peace I hadn’t felt in a long time, and I wished I could bottle it and hang on to it and make sure it didn’t go anywhere.

I felt like I was going to need it in the coming weeks. As much of it as I could get.

CHAPTER 37



JAX

I rose from my feet, stretching my arms over my head and letting out a long sigh. With some satisfaction, I noticed her checking me out from the corner of her eye, though she was doing her best to pretend she wasn't.

"You okay?" she asked, and I nodded.

"I think I'm going to pack it in for the day," I told her. It was Friday, nearly six in the evening, and we had been working hard all day. The letters were starting to dance around on the screen in front of me, and I was having a hard time keeping my focus. Better to call it here and chill for the weekend than to keep pushing and try to get through more than I could handle.

She leaned back from her desk, grinning.

"You're already calling it quitting time?" she teased. "Why, you got a hot date tonight?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" I replied, flashing a smile at her. She knew damn well I didn't. She was the only thing I could think of right now, the only thing I cared about at all. I didn't want to be with anyone else. Even if some supermodel had rolled through the door asking to take me out for dinner at the most expensive place in town, I would have turned her down. Morgan was the only one I cared about.

"You want to meet up tomorrow?" I asked her, cocking an eyebrow. "We could get together and do something, if you're free."

"Sure, I'd like that," she replied, and I felt like punching the air. It was like it had been when we were first dating again, when every time she agreed to see me it felt like a win. I was giddy over it, felt like a kid. I couldn't get enough, and from the way she was looking at me, I was pretty sure she was on the same page with all of this.

I headed down to the bar near our office when I was finished up at KICKS, leaving Morgan to close up for the day. She always stayed there later than me, so focused on what she was doing she clearly didn't want to break her flow for anything. It worked for her, so I couldn't criticize her. She was good at what she did, and I admired the hell out of how dedicated she was.

The guys were already waiting for me when I got there. It was Friday, and it was tradition to come down here and blow off steam from the working week that had just passed. I wasn't sure if I'd still be invited now that I was working somewhere else, but they had held a seat for me, and Max had already picked out a beer for me to try.

"There he is, the prodigal son!" Seb exclaimed, slapping me on the shoulder. He'd clearly already had a couple of drinks. He was normally never this excited to see me.

I grinned at them in greeting. "So, how's work been down at home base?" I asked. "You flooded any more toilets yet, or you managing to keep a lid on that for now?"

"Oh, come on, like you haven't done worse back in your day," Max said, shaking his head.

"I told you, I'm a legit businessman now," I replied, sitting up a little straighter in my seat. "I'm working with KICKS. One of the best brands in the business. I'm not involved in all your childish nonsense these days."

They knew I was kidding, but Derrick still clasped a hand to his chest like he couldn't believe I would say something like that.

"Hey, you're already forgetting about us?" he protested. "After everything we've done for you?"

"Yeah, probably just because he's working with someone he finds a whole lot more interesting than us," Max cut in, raising his eyebrows at me. "Right?"

I shifted my gaze away from him. I wasn't sure I wanted to talk to them about the truth of what was going on with Morgan, not yet. It still felt so fragile, as though scrutiny from the outside world would be enough to break it if I wasn't careful, and I wasn't going to let that happen.

"It's about the work, Max," I told him.

"Oh, yeah, like you would say that if it wasn't about her," Derrick said. "Is it her? The girl you were sleeping with before?"

I shrugged.

"It is!" Seb crowed triumphantly. "It totally is. Shit, you guys are working

on this together? Isn't that tough for you?"

"I'm there to get a job done," I told him firmly. Truth was, of course, I was dodging their questions as best I could so they wouldn't have a chance to get under my skin about it.

I lifted the beer to my lips and waited for them to get bored and change the topic, but it seemed as though I was the main focus of conversation this evening. That was what I got, I supposed, for being out of the office for a few days. They had all been dealing with their shit, but I had been out doing something interesting, and it seemed to have grabbed their attention.

Max eyed me for a long moment, and I tried to turn the conversation to the beer he'd picked out for me.

"Nice beer," I said. "New draft?"

"Yeah, it is," he replied, and he raised his eyebrows at me. "So, you in love with her?"

I sputtered into my drink. Of everything I had expected him to come out with, that had to be pretty far down the list.

"What the hell are you talking about?" I asked.

"You guys dated before, didn't you?" Max said.

"And you were sleeping together," Derrick said.

"Yeah, and that's in the past," I protested, looking around the table. I could hardly believe these guys, of all people, had the nerve to hit me with conversation about sleeping with women in our past. God only knew what the body count of everyone around this table would have added up to if we combined it.

"Not like you guys don't have a long list of conquests," I shot back. That at least got Spencer to shift in his seat a little. None of the others seemed to give a damn.

"Yeah, and now I'm all settled down, so it can happen," Seb pointed out.

"I'm not looking to settle down," I told him firmly, shaking my head. These guys? Damn, the way they went about things, it was as though they expected me to just drop everything I had been working for all this time and forget about the years that had passed since Morgan and I had split. It wasn't as though I could just forget about what had happened, wasn't like I could put it out of my mind.

"Oh, yeah, that's what I would have said, too." Max shook his head sagely.

I rolled my eyes at him and laughed. "Not everyone's trying to keep up

with you.”

They were just joshing me, but that didn't mean I was just going to sit there and take it. I knew they would turn this into a full-blown love affair if I didn't do my best to shut this speculation down before it went any further than it already had, and I didn't want any of that filtering back to the KICKS reps. As far as they knew, we were nothing more than coworkers, and that was the end of it.

“Maybe you all should be,” he replied smugly.

I shook my head at him fondly. I was glad he had managed to find something with Judy that made him so happy, but hell, it hadn't taken him long to fall into that smug married thing so many people did. Honestly, I got it. He just wanted to talk about her at every chance he got. If I could have spent tonight gushing about Morgan without fear of spilling the truth of my feelings for her, I would have likely been doing the exact same thing.

“Yeah, I'll stick with what I've got, thanks,” Derrick said, leaning back in his seat and grinning cockily. I knew he always had a new woman on the go, and I had no doubt the end of this evening would involve heading around to her place to spend the night.

“Yeah, me too,” Graham piped in.

I sat there in silence, not adding my voice to the pile.

“Look at that, he's not even saying anything!” Derrick pointed out, gesturing in my direction. “You've totally fallen for this girl, haven't you?”

“Guys,” I protested, but Max had already jumped in.

“You should have seen how hung up he was on her when they were dating the first time,” he added. “It was crazy. I've never seen him like that about anyone.”

“So, tell us the truth,” Seb asked, leaning forward and raising his eyebrows. “Are you in love with her now?”

I lifted my beer to my lips. I wasn't going to deny it because I didn't even know the answer to that question, but I sure as hell wasn't going to tell it to them before I had a chance to say it to her.

“I think you guys should be more focused on what I'm doing with the business, not what I'm doing with her,” I replied, shaking my head. “This is a big deal for us, remember? And all you think about is the woman I'm working with.”

Derrick rolled his eyes, but he knew I was right. The smile on his face told me so. He had been the one to tell me to try and keep my emotions out of

this, hadn't he? He knew what a big deal the KICKS contract was, and I couldn't let anything get in the way of it, not even my feelings for Morgan.

Even if they were starting to rise up again, so fast and so intense I wasn't sure how I was going to get rid of them.

"You're right," Spencer sighed heavily, though I could tell he wanted nothing more than to keep delving into what I had going on in my head. "How has work on the contract been coming along, anyway?"

And with that, I had managed to brush them off, at least for a little while longer. I was sure the questions would start up again eventually, but right now, I was willing to talk shop and keep everything else going on strictly between Morgan and me.

Maybe I enjoyed keeping it secret, just for now. Something just between the two of us. I wasn't sure where it was going to go in the future, but for now, at least, I just wanted to focus on the comfort and enjoyment of knowing that I had her all to myself.

And that my feelings were mine and mine alone, not something I had to share with a table full of guys who probably would have roasted me mercilessly if they had found out the truth.

I was legit falling for Morgan all over again.

CHAPTER 38



MORGAN

When I heard my phone buzzing on my bedside table, I let out a groan. I didn't have work today. Why was my alarm going off so early?

It took me a moment to realize it was actually a call coming in. I checked the time as I picked up the phone. It was barely seven. What on Earth was anyone doing trying to call me right then? I needed to sleep for at least a few more hours.

I answered the call. Unless someone's house was on fire or something, I was going to be pissed at whoever this was. And even then, they should have been calling the fire department, not my sleepy ass.

"Hey, Morgan."

Jax's voice came down the line, and, even in my sleepy state, I felt a smile spreading over my lips. "What are you doing right now?"

"I'm lying in bed, you asshole," I replied. "It's so early. And it's Saturday! I think I should be allowed to sleep in at least one day out of the week."

"I want to take you out."

I raised my eyebrows, rubbing my hand over my pillow-marked face. What was he doing up so early? I didn't know what he could have planned, but the thought of seeing him was already starting to draw me out of my sleepy reverie.

"I guess we could," I mumbled. "You'll have to come to my place to meet me, though. I need some time to get ready."

"Sure," he replied brightly. "I'll be there in about an hour. See you soon."

And with that, he hung up and left me to grope around and get myself out of bed and into a shower.

Even though I would normally have cussed out anyone who tried to get me out of bed this early in the day, I had to admit, I was looking forward to seeing him. When he had suggested hanging out today, I had expected a booty call this evening, not an actual daytime meet-up. Almost as though this was an actual date.

I took a quick shower and pulled on some jeans and a T-shirt as I towel-dried my hair, feeling my heart skip around in my chest as I thought about seeing him. I should have had more control over myself. We had barely started hanging out again, as anything other than professional rivals, at least. Why was it I could already feel myself lighting up at the thought of getting to spend some more time with him? We had already spent most of this whole week together. Wasn't that enough?

He turned up on my doorstep with a coffee in hand for me exactly the way I liked it—double-espresso with a pump of vanilla and a generous amount of foam. It must have been years since he'd gotten me a coffee, but the order was perfect.

I sipped on it gratefully. "God, that's good," I sighed as I planted myself down on my couch. "So, what exactly have you dragged me out of bed for this early?"

"There's a matinee showing of Lavender Rain this morning, down at the old Royal," he explained. "I got us tickets."

I grinned. We used to go to that rundown old place together all the time because the tickets were so dirt cheap hardly anyone else would bother going and we could just make out in the seats as some old movie played. I didn't know if he was expecting that today, but he knew Lavender Rain, that cheesy old romantic comedy, was one of my all-time favorites.

"That can't be for another couple of hours, though," I protested.

"Which is why I wanted to leave room for us to have breakfast first," he explained. "There's a little French place that's just opened down the street. You feel like pastries?"

"I always feel like pastries," I replied.

I sipped on my coffee as we made our way across town to this breakfast spot he wanted to take me to. The city was already bustling with people, couples heading out on their early morning runs together, looking all sporty in their active wear.

"Promise me you're never going to try and make me do that," I asked him as I nodded to one of the athletic couples passing us.

He laughed. “Yeah, not my thing, don’t worry,” he replied. “I might try and get you weightlifting first thing, but running’s not for me.”

“Thank God,” I sighed. “I don’t want you to get into a habit of getting me out of bed this early, you hear?”

We arrived at the bistro, where the servers were just starting to lay out the pastries, fresh made and glistening with butter and other deliciousness, under the glass counter. They all looked so damn good, I could hardly pick which one I wanted to start with, and Jax insisted we get a few different ones to try. I think we ended up with a half-dozen between us, and I tried to remember the last time I treated myself to a breakfast that wasn’t just whatever I could wolf down on the way to work.

When I was with him, though, he actually seemed to give a damn about what I ate, about taking care of me, and I appreciated it so much. He ordered us coffee to sip before the movie started, and I found myself glad he had come around so early. I would have been way too tempted to just stay in bed and skip the movie if he hadn’t sprung it on me like this, and the enjoyable bustle as the café began to fill up around us was getting my mind off the project I had worked on far too late the day before.

He leaned back in his seat as he glanced at the crowd starting to form outside the front door. Even though this place had only just opened, it looked like they were already starting to attract some impressive customer numbers.

“Do you think we should ask them what they do for marketing here?” he said, glancing over at me with a grin.

“Different branding, but maybe we could do a deal,” I joked back. “Free croissant with every pair of shoes? So you have something to fuel your run?”

“Hmm, I like it,” he said, tapping his finger on his chin. “Smart. Though maybe we should go for a coffee instead of a croissant?”

We playfully bounced ideas off of each other, even though it was just for fun. Damn, it felt so good to relax and just let go of some of the tension that had been building over the course of the last few days. He had always been able to cut through the shit that sometimes clogged up my head and get me to just have some fun. It was one of the things I loved most about him.

Had loved. I wasn’t trying to pick up where we had left off. Right? At least, I was pretty sure I wasn’t.

We headed down to the cinema after we had finished breakfast, and I found myself reaching for his hand almost on instinct before I could stop myself. I pulled my hand away, annoyed that I had given in to the comfort of

his closeness so quickly. I should have known better, shouldn't I? Known better than to let myself get drawn in so fast again.

He had already booked our tickets, and I tried to argue about paying for them, but he brushed me off at once.

"Let me get this," he told me. "You can get the next one, alright?"

The next one? He was already thinking about the two of us doing this again? I grinned at the thought.

"Yeah, well, we're not going to have such an early start when I do it," I warned him, and he shrugged.

"Maybe you'll get used to getting up early," he said with a smile.

"Doubt it," I replied.

The usher led us through to the small screen where the movie was showing. God, this place was just as I had remembered it, the same slightly musty smell and the same velvet curtains on either side of the screen. They used an old-school projector here, and you could hear it being fired up when they started to show the previews.

The seats were maybe half full, if that. I still didn't get how it stayed open, but hey, as long as people were still coming here, that was the most important thing. Since I had started earning a little more money, I had treated myself to more upmarket places for the most part, but I had to admit, there was something really fun about coming down here, inhaling the smells, hearing the click-click-click of the projector behind us as the film spun around inside it.

There were so many memories I had made with him in this city when I had first been starting out as an adult here. So many little corners of it that belonged to the two of us, sneaking around on our dates together, enjoying these little moments we could snatch, just the two of us. And I had pushed almost all of them down inside me, worried about how I would feel if they started to rise to the surface again, worried about how I would feel.

Worried I would want them again.

As the credits for the film began to roll in front of us, he reached over and slipped his hand into mine, grazing his thumb over the top of my wrist. His touch was so soft, so gentle, and I felt the warmth start to bloom in my chest again. The sweetness of it was impossible to deny. When we were together like this, it was as though nothing else mattered. As though we were right back where we had been when we had started all of this, way back before I had been stupid enough to end things.

The movie started to play, and I did my best to focus on it, as though I couldn't have quoted it basically word-for-word as it was. But there was something else on my mind, something else that seemed more important.

He had remembered this. Every little detail of this. How many fancy dates had he been on, how many women had he swept out on luxurious evenings, and he still recalled exactly where we had come on our dates together when we had first arrived in the city? I wondered how much more he remembered. How much more he had just been waiting for a chance to do with me again.

I gripped onto his hand a little tighter, squeezing it, feeling the warmth of it like I had done all those years ago. I had been so sure that part of my life was behind me. Hell, I had been the one to break it off, hadn't I?

And I had thought it was what I wanted. I had been so sure that was the right thing. I thought I needed to leave him behind to get where I needed to go. I thought he had done the same for me, too. I thought he was done with me, thought he had forgotten all of this, everything we had shared with one another.

But it was clearly still there in him. And maybe it was there in me, too. He had never forgotten it. He'd held on to it even after I had broken his heart. And maybe, even though I had done everything I could to try and push it down, the feelings, those memories, were still as fresh as they had ever been. Maybe there was nothing I could do to escape them because he was the one I wanted to be with.

I looked down at our hands, locked together, in the soft glow of the screen in front of us. It felt so right, being here with him, as though no time at all had passed. Like nothing had happened between us and we were still together like we had been when we were teenagers.

I leaned over and put my head on his shoulder. He nestled his head against mine, and I could feel his body relax into mine, the tension easing from his muscles as he moved a little closer to me. I didn't know what was going to happen when this movie was over but right now, I just wanted to enjoy the peace and quiet of his comforting presence.

CHAPTER 39



JAX

As I headed toward the office, I couldn't keep the grin off my face. Getting to see her again, getting to spend real time with her, it was the kind of gift I couldn't get enough of.

As if we hadn't seen enough of each other over the weekend as it was. I could practically sense her rolling her eyes at me playfully, telling me not to get so excited about seeing her again, warning me we had to take care of work. As though I gave a damn about any of it when I knew I was going to get a chance to see her.

My phone buzzed as I made my way down the street, and I pulled it out, wondering if it would be Morgan calling to check in on where I was. I wanted to get down there as quickly as I could, but I had woken up a little late today. It had been a busy weekend, busier than what I was used to, and it had taken it out of me, although in the best way possible.

But instead, it was Derrick.

"Morning," he greeted me.

"Hey," I replied. "You guys manage to refrain from destroying the office while I'm away?"

"Yeah, so far." He chuckled.

"How's it looking now?" I asked.

"Like it never even happened in the first place," he replied. "You would never guess anything had gone down here at all."

"Glad to hear it," I replied. "And what exactly are you calling about? You need to get me on some more hard labor for you?"

"No, no, you're free for now," he said with amusement. "I was calling because I wanted to let you know that I've been looking into the policy for

relationships between people working for different brands, like you and Morgan are.”

“Oh?” I replied. It was something that had crossed my mind, the legitimacy of what we were doing, but it wouldn’t have bothered me much to find out that we shouldn’t have even been considering it. I still would have gone for it. When it came to her, my desire was impossible to hide, no matter what I did to push it down.

“Yeah, it looks like the two of you aren’t breaking any rules, at least when it comes to our company and hers,” he explained. “There’s nothing about relationships between people who happen to be working on the same project, so I think you’re in the clear there.”

“That’s a relief,” I said.

“But I don’t know about KICKS,” he warned me. “They might have a different policy on all of this. You should check it out with them if you get the chance. Get a feel for where they’re at. You don’t want to get caught and wind up endangering the contract, right?”

“Right,” I replied. The way he was speaking, it was as though he was making damn sure I was on the same page as him. I wasn’t going to mess this up. I had promised them that, and I hoped they trusted me to put the business side of it first.

“Good,” he replied. “You need anything, you give me a call, okay?”

“I will,” I promised him, and we said our goodbyes as I arrived at the KICKS office. Was there some way for me to subtly drop in a hint about what their policies on inter-staff dating were? Morgan and I weren’t exactly employed by them, but we were working a contract for them, and that could have been enough to get them wondering about what was happening between us. I wasn’t sure if I could find out without blowing up our spot, but hey, maybe it would be worth trying to get to the bottom of it.

By the time I arrived at the office they had set aside for us, Ian was already waiting there with Morgan. By the look on his face, he had some exciting news.

“Ah, now you’re both here, perfect,” he said, a smile crossing his face. “There’s something I wanted to run by the two of you.”

“Sure thing,” I replied, sliding into my seat next to Morgan. Beneath the table, I touched my leg to hers, a barely perceptible motion that would have gone under the radar for Ian, but I could feel her little shiver of attraction at the pressure of it. I loved seeing those little reactions from her, seeing what I

could get away with right under the nose of the guy we were meant to be working for.

“So, we’ve had a lot of interest from a distributor in Greece,” he explained. “We’ve got a large seller who’s interested in distributing our new shoe through a major retailer.”

I nodded and glanced over at Morgan, trying to figure out if she might have known a little more about this than I did. I wasn’t sure exactly what he was getting at here, but I had a guess.

“And I want to know exactly what kind of market we’re going to be walking into if we take this deal,” he continued. “So, I’d like the two of you to go over to Greece for me and do some on-the-ground market research. All paid for by the company, of course.”

I raised my eyebrows. They must have had some serious cash to throw around if they could afford to do something like that.

Morgan’s face lit up. “A trip to Greece?” she blurted out, unable to contain her excitement.

“Yes, you just can’t get a feel for everything we’re going to need to understand from a distance,” he explained. “Better to get someone out there, someone who can get a feel for the information we’ll need to know to put together an effective ad campaign. If we’re going with an international seller, then we need to be able to understand the market we’re working with.”

“Of course,” she replied, furrowing her brow in an attempt to look more serious, though I could tell she was nearly bursting with excitement at the sound of it. The two of us, on a trip together, to a place I knew neither of us had been before? Yeah, it would be awesome. Considering where the two of us had been taking our relationship lately, it couldn’t have come at a better time.

He ran through the details of the trip, and I could tell he was surprised by how willing we were to agree to all of it. If only he’d known what was really going on here, what a gift this actually was for us. He probably would have pulled the idea before it even got started if he’d known we were actually involved and the two of us were going to spend that trip as much in our hotel as we were out on the streets trying to learn everything we needed to about the Greek market.

But we weren’t going to let any of that slide, not a chance in hell. We’d keep our mouths shut till we were out there, and we’d get the equivalent of an all-expenses-paid dirty weekend to ourselves. Well, aside from the work we

were going to try and fit in around it, of course.

“When do you want us to leave?” I asked.

“Tonight,” he replied. “I have two tickets booked on a first-class international overnight this evening, if both of you are able to leave on such short notice—”

“No problem,” she replied quickly, her grin spreading to take over most of her face. “I’ll need to head back, get some bags packed. Is that okay?”

“Sure,” he replied, nodding. “I’ll get the information passed on to both of you as soon as I get the chance. Probably about eight hours till you go. You sure that’s okay?”

“Not an issue at all,” she assured him. She was practically dancing in her seat, probably imagining how much fun we were going to have toasting ourselves on the warm beaches in between market research sessions. She had always loved the sunshine, after all.

As we headed downstairs, she sighed happily. “Holy shit, I can’t believe we get to do this. We’re going to have such a good time.”

“We will,” I replied, raising my eyebrows at her playfully.

“Not just like that.” She laughed. “I mean, I’ve never been to Greece before. It’s going to be so much fun to explore. I can’t remember the last time I got out of the city, let alone out of the country.”

“You want me to pick you up so we can go to the airport together?” I suggested, and she nodded, beaming.

“That sounds perfect,” she agreed. “I’ll give you a text when I’m ready to go, okay? I have a lot of packing to do.”

“We’re not going for long,” I reminded her, shaking my head fondly. “You probably don’t have to pack that much.”

“Yeah, and maybe I want to,” she replied, pouting playfully. “I need to make sure I have different outfits, okay? I don’t want to go out there and look like a slob.”

I knew there was going to be no arguing with her, so I waved her off and we headed back to our places to pack. I didn’t take long to get everything together, throwing everything into a bag and squishing it down until it zipped up at last. I had just tossed in a few outfits, made sure I had my phone charger, and now, I was ready to go.

I didn’t know what she was going to be putting together for the rest of the trip, but hey, whatever she needed. I wanted her to have a good time. The trip was technically for work, but as far as I was concerned, as long as I could

spend time with her, it was going to be leisure time.

She texted me a couple of hours before the flight to tell me she was ready to be picked up, and I headed down to her place to find her standing outside with three bags, stuffed to the brim. She struggled to herd them all into the car, and I shook my head at her in amusement.

“You really need all that stuff?”

“Hey, it said there was no luggage restriction,” she protested. “I’m going to take advantage of that, alright? Besides, you never know what you might need, do you?”

She climbed into the car next to me, and I could feel the excitement buzzing off her in waves. I loved seeing her like this. It wasn’t often she really let go of control, really allowed herself to relax and enjoy what was right in front of her, but I was glad she seemed to have found the space for it right now. She deserved it. She worked her ass off to get to where she was, and if she couldn’t kick back and enjoy it every now and then, what was the point?

“You ready to get going?” I asked her, reaching over to squeeze her hand. This kind of casual, gentle touch between us was still a novelty to me, and I wasn’t sure how long it would take for me to get used to it. I hoped I never did. I hoped it kept being as exciting as it was now.

“I am,” she replied. “Let’s go to Greece!”

CHAPTER 40



MORGAN

As we arrived at the airport, I felt a buzz of excitement course through my chest. This was it. We were really doing this. I could hardly believe it was happening, but at the same time, it felt so right to be doing this with Jax by my side.

Susan knew I was going to be away for a few days, and she had encouraged me to go to Greece and prove how useful we were to KICKS. I had been surprised she was so glad for me to get out of there, and I wondered if she felt like I could use a break to blow off some steam. Sometimes, I worked so hard it was like I got tunnel vision, and I couldn't see anything but the shit I needed to take care of.

But this? This was going to give me a chance to forget about all of that for a while. Yes, I knew we were technically meant to be working while we were out here, but all I wanted was to focus on the chance to get out of the city for a while and spend some more time with Jax.

I still couldn't believe I got to do this with him. How many times had the two of us talked about traveling together when we had been dating? Of course, we had been way too poor to afford it then, but it hadn't stopped us from looking up fancy hotels, seeing how expensive the top-tier restaurants would be, checking out first-class flights together. It had all seemed as though it belonged to another life back there, but now, it was as though we were being handed the chance to live out those fantasies we had made all those years before.

Inside the airport, once our tickets were scanned, we were ushered toward a private lounge. They really had spared no expense, and I wanted to enjoy every moment of it. They had clearly gone all out for us in the hopes of

convincing us to go on this impromptu trip, but they shouldn't have bothered with anything so fancy. I would have jumped at the chance to do this no matter what. Hell, if I had to fly the plane myself, I would still have done it.

We were handed a glass of champagne as we waited for the flight. Our bags were whisked off and checked in for us. Jax touched his glass to mine.

"To a successful trip," he said, and I nodded before I took a sip. I wasn't sure exactly what a successful trip was going to look like for the two of us, given that we were probably going to spend a whole lot of time distracted by each other, but maybe that was the only kind of success I needed to focus on.

"You remember when we used to plan these trips?" I asked him, slightly nervous. I wasn't sure if he would recall it, and admitting there was some part of our relationship that still lingered in my mind seemed dangerous.

"Of course I do," he replied. "Where were we going to go first?"

"Paris," I replied. "So we could eat pastries by the Seine and see the art. And stay at a little hotel off the Champs-Elysees."

"God, that's right," he said, smiling as he tipped his head back like it was all coming back to him now. "And then we were going to do Berlin, right?"

"For the nightlife and the beer," I replied, nodding along. I could still remember how excited we had been, how thrilling it had all seemed, exploring the world together. But at the same time how safe I knew I would have felt doing that all with him. How confident I would have been with him at my side, even though I had never so much as left the city before that point in my life. He always made everything seem a whole lot more possible, as though the world was opening up in front of me when he was there to keep me company.

We talked about those trips we had planned and avoided the topic of why exactly we had never taken them. It seemed a little too close to the bone to talk about how I had ended things, dumped him as brutally as I had. Besides, we were doing it now, and that was all that mattered, wasn't it? Even if it was for work, we were still getting the chance to explore some more of the world, and the thought of getting to share this little thrill with him made me really happy. As though some higher power had tossed us together once more and guided us to this trip so we could do as we had always said we would, taking on a whole new part of the globe together, just the two of us.

We were called to board the plane a half hour later and guided toward the sleek, spacious first-class area. I stretched my legs out in front of me, savoring the feel of all that extra legroom.

“I could get used to this,” I said.

Jax nodded. “You should,” he replied. “It’s what you deserve.”

Food was served to us not long after take-off, better than most of the dishes you could get in the city, and once I had eaten, I felt myself getting sleepy. The buzz of the engines below us soothed me, and soon, I had passed out, sleeping through the rest of the flight.

When I woke up, the plane was making a smooth landing in Athens, Greece. I pressed my face to the window in excitement to get a look at the new destination. The sun was glowing on the tarmac below me, so beautiful it practically took my breath away, and I had hardly seen anything yet.

We headed off of the plane to pick up our bags, and a car was waiting for us to take us down to our hotel. I looked out the window as we circled the top of the city, catching sight of the Parthenon where it towered imposingly over the houses below. Even though it was basically in ruins now, it looked like something out of a fairytale to me, as though it couldn’t really have existed in real life.

“Is it everything you wanted it to be?” Jax murmured to me, leaning over so he could get a look at what I was seeing.

“Yeah, it is,” I replied. The bright white of the houses and buildings around us gave it an almost otherworldly feeling, especially under the blaze of the sun above us. The sky was a crisp, clear blue, and the air was warm and full of promise.

We arrived at the hotel and my jaw dropped when I got a look at it. I had known the place was fancy, but this was beyond anything I could have imagined. It towered against the rest of the buildings around it, with gold lettering on the front over the enormous glass doors. Inside, a fountain sat in the entrance lobby, and a woman with a perfectly coiffed bob and bright red suit greeted us from behind the desk. “Hello there, do you have rooms booked with us?”

“Yes, we’re here with KICKS,” Jax told her, and she quickly looked through her computer until she found us in the system. A smile spread across her face, and she pulled out a couple of keycards and handed them to us.

“Here you go,” she told us. “Jamie will help you with your bags. He’s waiting just by the elevators. If there’s anything else you need, don’t hesitate to ask me or any of the other staff, okay?”

Jax nodded. “Thanks for your help.”

We made our way to our rooms, which were next to one another, and he

grinned as he slipped his key into the door.

“Something tells me these are going to be good,” he said.

“Better than we would have been able to afford when we were in college, anyway,” I teased, and I pushed open the door.

When I saw what was waiting for me on the other side, my jaw dropped. It was palatial. Downright palatial. The room had a huge balcony that overlooked the city below, and I rushed out to get a chance to stare at the beautiful view. I leaned on the gold-dusted banister and smiled. A cool breeze was starting to roll in, lifting up my hair slightly, and I kept open the big double doors to let it into the room.

The room was decked out with about every luxury I could have imagined for a place like this—a giant king size bed stacked high with pillows and spare blankets, a couple of fans to cool the room down in the evening, a minibar, a huge TV, a bathroom all to myself with a giant claw-footed tub in the middle that looked perfect for relaxing in at the end of a long day. I sniffed all of the free samples of shower gel and hair products, inhaling the rich, spicy scent and smiling.

Everything was perfect.

Jax shot me a text to suggest we head out to dinner, and I agreed at once. I took a quick shower to wash off the remains of the trip, then grabbed a dress from my bags to change into. He might have teased me about how much I had packed, but I had wanted to be ready for any and all eventualities that might have come my way. No way was I going to screw up by not having the right outfit for any particular occasion.

I slipped on the simple navy shift dress I had picked out for the evening, then ran a brush through my hair as I stood in front of the mirror. I couldn't help but smile at myself. I could never have imagined myself here in a place like this, with him of all people.

When we had talked about traveling all those years ago, it had seemed so far away, and who could have imagined we would actually get a chance to live out those fantasies years later? And with each other at our sides? It was everything I had wanted back then, everything I had dreamed of, even though I might not have been able to put it into words.

Just a shame I had missed out on so much time after I had broken up with him. We could have done this a long time ago if I had just stuck it out a while longer.

I pushed that down at once. What mattered was that we were here now,

the two of us, on a trip, like we had always dreamed we would be together. Like we had always hoped. We might have taken the long way round, but it was the destination that mattered.

And what a destination we were in. This place was gorgeous. Unlike anything I had seen before. I had been so focused on work these last few years, I'd hardly had time to explore the world around me, and this was the chance I needed to do it.

I was so grateful to be here and even more grateful to be here with him. I coated my lashes in some mascara and slicked on a little lip gloss. Nothing fancy. I didn't have to worry about the way I looked so much when it came to him. He would gaze at me as though I was the most perfect thing in the world, no matter what. And he always made me believe I really might be.

I thanked my lucky stars, or whoever it was who was looking out for me, that I had managed to find my way here with him. It might not have been how I expected us to get where we were, but now that we were here, I knew it was right.

And I knew I wouldn't have done this with anyone else.

CHAPTER 41



JAX

“How do you know about this place, anyway?” she asked me as we stepped out of the hotel and onto the cool street outside. She looked so gorgeous in that dress, it was hard for me to keep my head on straight and not just stare at her.

“One of the staff suggested it,” I explained. “Local place, they said not many of the tourists know about it.”

“Perfect,” she said happily. “I want to try some real Greek food. Something authentic, not something they’ve edited for the tourists.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” I agreed, and we made our way down the cobbled streets away from the hotel, taking the route the receptionist had explained to me when she had recommended this restaurant to me in the first place.

There were a few people scattered around, most of them sipping drinks on outside terraces at bars that were playing some soccer game inside. I caught snatches of it here and there, and once, a cheer went up from the crowd.

I laughed. “I guess that’s a good sign, then.”

She shook her head. “I know nothing about soccer,” she admitted. “I have no idea if it’s good or not.”

We arrived at the restaurant, a little taverna that I probably would have walked past had the receptionist not let me know it existed. An older man greeted us at the door. He didn’t speak much English, but he knew enough, and we were led to a small table draped in a checked red-and-white cloth with a candle dripping wax down on top of it. We had a view out onto the terrace beyond, and outside, the sun was just beginning to set, bathing the whole city in deep red-gold rays.

“I love this,” she murmured, and I stole a glance at her. There was no way around it. This was romantic. Really damn romantic. And I wanted nothing more than to just let this be the date it so clearly needed to be.

But Derrick’s words played in my mind, warning me not to do anything we might get in trouble for. Just because we weren’t going to get in any trouble from the companies we worked for didn’t mean that we were in the clear. This was a trip paid for by KICKS, after all, and if they decided they didn’t like the way we were going about things, it wouldn’t bode well for us. If they found out we had agreed to this because we knew it would give us some more time to spend together, we would be in some serious trouble and might even get kicked off the contract.

“You thinking about the trip?” Morgan asked as the waiter came out with our menus. Luckily, most of the dishes had been translated into English, so we could actually make out what we were ordering.

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m worried we’re not actually going to get any sort of work done,” I told her, smiling. “Too easy to get distracted.”

“Yeah, by this food if nothing else,” she said, looking down at the menu. “You want to get a *mezze* to share? And some wine?”

“Sounds perfect,” I agreed, though I was sure she knew I wasn’t actually getting at the quality of the food for what was going to keep our minds off work.

Either way, we ordered a pile of dishes, and soon, the table was practically groaning beneath the weight of it. The red wine was gorgeous, clearly a local vintage, judging by the label. I savored the taste of it, rich and fruity, on my tongue, before I started to tuck in.

“I know what you mean about getting distracted,” she said once we’d had a good amount of food.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah, I mean with us,” she confessed. “It’s going to be hard to keep focused on work when we’re together all the time.”

“But we’re going to have to,” I warned her firmly. “We can’t let ourselves get distracted. We need to stay focused on what we’re here for. If it gets back to KICKS that we’ve just been using this trip to goof off and have fun, they’re probably going to boot us right off the contract.”

Her face paled slightly, and it was clear she hadn’t even considered that.

“I can’t let that happen,” she replied, shaking her head. “I’ve worked too hard to get here.”

“Exactly,” I agreed. “I know. I feel the same way. I don’t want either of us to put all our hard work at risk. It just wouldn’t be right.”

“It just feels like we’re finally getting those vacations we always talked about, you know?”

I sighed and nodded. “It does. And we can do a little bit of that. Exploring, stuff like that. But we can’t let ourselves get too distracted by... what’s going on with us.”

I didn’t know exactly what to call what was happening with us. I had no idea how to define it, if it even could be defined at all. Some part of me wanted to take the chance to ask her, but I knew I had to restrain myself. I couldn’t shatter this by demanding she put a name to it all, even if I wished I could just make sure she felt the same way I did. The fact she was here on this trip with me should have been enough. It should have satisfied me.

“As long as we can have a few adventures while we’re here,” she replied, smiling. “It would be silly not to, right? I mean, when are we going to get the chance to go on an all-expenses-paid trip to Greece again?”

“Who knows? Maybe we’ll work on another contract together after this one,” I replied before I could stop myself.

She laughed. “Damn, you really changed your tune,” she teased me. “You were trying to take this contract from me not so long ago.”

“Yeah, well, I guess there’s something to be said for working with you after all,” I admitted.

“Glad you’ve seen sense,” she replied playfully, and she reached for her wine again.

The two of us spent the rest of the evening talking, eating, and drinking. As the night cooled down a little, we moved out onto the patio outside, which was surrounded by flowers, filling the air with a strong, heady perfume.

This place was quiet and peaceful, even though the city lay just beyond the entrance. It felt like our own little slice of heaven, somewhere we could just be together and nobody would know a thing about what we were doing or why we were here.

I could have held her hand. I could have pulled her in close and kissed her, and nobody would have known a thing about it. But it felt too much like danger. For me, it felt too much like trouble. I didn’t want to get into the habit of kissing her in public, not if I could avoid it, because all it would take was one person to see the wrong thing at the wrong time and our cover would be blown for good, and I couldn’t have that.

I couldn't ruin this when we had only just started it again. It felt too delicate for that. I refused to do anything to endanger what we had, not when I had just managed to get her back, not when we were at the start of something new.

By the time it was starting to get dark and the streetlights came to life around us, I knew we should have been getting out of there, getting back to the hotel so we would be fresh for tomorrow, but all I wanted was to spend the rest of the night here with her. The wine had started to lower my inhibitions, and it was getting harder and harder to talk myself out of doing whatever it was I wanted with her.

We paid the bill and made our way back onto the street. She looped her arm through mine, and my mind raced. Would people read into this, if they saw the two of us doing this? Would they guess there was something up?

I didn't want to brush her off. I doubted I could have even if I wanted to. When she was this close to me, it was like all my good sense went out the window, and all I could think about was being with her, being near to her, holding her, touching her.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, and her voice was low, tinged with want. I could tell she wanted me to come to her room with her, go up to her bed, stay the night with her, and God, I wanted to. I did. If I thought the two of us could get away with it, I would have jumped on the chance in an instant.

"Tired," I replied. It wasn't entirely untrue. I was exhausted from the journey, and I knew I would need a good night's sleep if I was going to be able to get up and do my job tomorrow. And she needed the same thing, even though I could tell she wanted to do anything but.

I didn't want to push her away, but I needed to play like I didn't know what she was looking for. It was the only way we were going to get through all of this without being busted. What if the KICKS reps were checking in with the people at the hotel, making sure nothing untoward was going on? We would have been busted on the first night, dragged back to the USA, and probably kicked off the contract, too.

"Me too," she sighed, probably figuring out we weren't going to be getting up to anything on that night, at least. It was going to be impossible for me to keep my distance this entire time, but at least I could put it off a little while longer. I didn't have to walk into a mistake on this first night, at least.

"I should probably get some rest," she continued as we arrived outside the

door to the hotel. Making our way in, we headed for the elevator, to take us back up to our rooms. God, did they have to be right next door to each other? It was as though the universe was testing me, pushing me to see how much I could handle before I just gave up and broke and fucked her again.

She paused outside her door and turned to me, a smile on her face.

“Thank you for tonight,” she murmured. “I had a really nice time. And I wouldn’t have wanted to do it with anyone but you.”

I nodded. “Anytime,” I replied, my voice catching in my throat as I spoke. The desire for her was getting the better of me, and I knew I had to get it in hand if I was going to make it through the rest of this trip unscathed.

“See you tomorrow, then,” she told me, and she slipped into her room.

I waited for the door to close behind her, and I let out a breath I didn’t even know I had been holding. Shit. And that was just the first night. How hard was the rest of this going to turn out to be?

CHAPTER 42



MORGAN

I groaned as I lifted my head from the pillow. Maybe it was the wine, maybe it was the travel, maybe it was some combination of the two, but I felt as though I had just been hit by a damn bus.

I squinted against the light coming in through the window beyond me and rubbed my hand over my face. Of course I was tired. The thrill of arriving here in one piece and exploring some of the area last night, of eating the food and drinking the wine, wasn't as fresh now, and I was going to take a few days to get used to it.

There was a knock at the door, and I looked over as I sat up in bed.

"Who is it?"

"It's me," Jax called back. "I've got breakfast. And coffee, more importantly."

My heart flipped when I heard his voice. I had been hoping he was going to come to bed with me last night. In fact, I had been kind of sad when he had made that excuse about being tired, but I guessed it was for the best. It was safer to play it like this than to do it any other way, at least for now.

"Just a minute." I got out of bed, wrapped my robe at the end of the bed around myself and wondered if this could all pass for just a bit of professional help. Would him coming to my room this early arouse suspicion? I didn't know. I was overthinking everything, and it was starting to drive me fully crazy.

But when I saw his face when I opened the door, and the coffee and the pastries he was carrying, I couldn't help but smile. I could never resist him this early in the morning when he was all fresh-faced and enthusiastic about everything.

“How are you up and about?” I groaned as he carried my food over to a table in the room.

“I’m excited to get a chance to look around this place,” he replied as though it should have been obvious. “How did you sleep?”

“Not as well as you evidently,” I said as I reached for one of the pastries he’d brought up. It was a croissant filled with some kind of almond jam, and it was downright delicious.

“Okay, I’m going to need at least three of these to get through the day,” I told him through a mouthful of crumbs. “So, what are we doing today exactly?”

“We have a meeting with the reps from Drumbeat, the people who want to distribute KICKS’ new shoes,” he replied. “Should be a good way to get a feel for the kind of branding they’re looking for, and we’re going to be able to sit down with one of the advertising reps, too.”

“Oh, good,” I replied, nodding. I had all but forgotten we were actually here to do a job in the first place, but I needed to stay focused. We were here for a reason, not just to sit around and relax and hang out together, and I would do well to remember it.

“Yeah, if your jetlagged ass can stand up to it,” he teased me before he sipped on the coffee he had brought up. “There’s still food down at the hotel restaurant, by the way. They have a good breakfast spread.”

“Maybe I’ll check it out on another day,” I replied, waving a hand. “I think I’m good with this for now, okay?”

We had our breakfast together, and then he left me to get dressed and take a shower to prepare for the day ahead. It was already really warm, and I picked a light, floaty dress that would just about pass as professional. I didn’t want to be dripping sweat in this first meeting, did I?

We headed down to the office a little later, and a cool breeze rolled through the streets. I pulled out my shades to ward off the glare of the sun, tipping my head back and allowing the feel of it to wash through me. I liked this. I could get used to it. It felt different than the city, back in New York, less rushed. There, I felt as though I was being pushed toward one specific end goal, and even though I knew I was here for work, there was a sense of freedom I hadn’t had before.

“You ready?” Jax asked me as we arrived outside the office of the place we were going to be meeting with the people we were now working with. A part of me was a little nervous, though I knew it was ridiculous. They had

sent us out here because they trusted we would be able to come away with the information they needed, and I knew I could pull this off.

“Yes, I’m good,” I replied with as much determination as I could muster. It was going to be just fine.

We headed inside, and we were met with a slightly balding man in an expensive suit with a broad, bright-white glossy smile.

“You must be Jaxson and Morgan,” he greeted us. “Lovely to meet you. Please, right this way.”

He guided us to the office that was waiting for us, where three men who looked virtually indistinguishable from him were waiting for us. We all shook hands, and I felt a little nervous, being the only woman in the room. I hoped none of them would look at me sideways for it. I took my seat next to Jax, glad I had him there for support. He always made me feel totally sure of myself, like I could take on the world.

“So, I understand that you’re interested in working with KICKS to distribute their new release,” Jax began, clasping his hands in front of him and kicking off the conversation. “Can you tell us a little more about the market you’re going to be aiming this release at?”

The conversation flowed with surprising ease after that. I clicked in to work mode, forgetting all the nerves I’d been hanging onto before, brushing them aside like it was nothing. When I was doing what I was good at, nothing else mattered.

Jax and I bounced off each other with ease, the two of us sharing ideas with the new representatives like it was the most natural thing in the world for us to be working together. I knew he had only been joking when he had said that we should work together after this, but hell, maybe he had a point.

By the time we finished up, we had managed to gather a decent amount of information about what they were looking for. I still knew there was a lot for us to get our heads around in terms of this new approach and this new market, but I would be able to pull it together. We already had a decent amount for a report, maybe not everything we needed, but we could send it back to KICKS and make sure they could see we were actually using our time here to do something useful on their dime.

“It was great to meet you,” I told the guys as I shook hands with them at the door of the building. One of them, Terry, held back for a moment, looking between the two of us with interest.

“You guys make a lovely couple,” he said.

I shook my head at once, and I could feel him beside me doing the exact same thing.

“We’re not a couple,” I told him quickly. “I—”

“Have you guys thought about checking out the snorkeling near here?” he asked us. “If you haven’t tried it out, it’s amazing. Something you’ll never forget.”

I didn’t know what to say. Some part of me wanted to drive home to this guy that I had no involvement with Jax, but clearly, we were giving off that energy. And maybe there was a part of me that enjoyed knowing people looked at us and could see our chemistry, tell our attraction to one another. It was like the world could see it, even if I wanted to deny it, even if I felt like I should have been better at hiding what was going on between us.

“Where is that?” Jax asked with interest, and the guy shared some directions with us. I glanced over at Jax in surprise. He seemed to be the one more careful about keeping what we had under wraps, but right now, it was as though he couldn’t wait to spend more time together and didn’t even care to deny this guy’s perception that we were a couple.

“You really should go if you get a chance. It’s beautiful at this time of year,” he said, smiling. “If there’s one thing you do in this city, it should be that.”

With that, he shook our hands one more time each before he headed back to his office.

“Snorkeling, huh?” Jax said, flashing me a grin.

“I thought you said we should be more careful about keeping things under wraps,” I reminded him, but the smile on my face told him how I really felt. I couldn’t have hidden it, even if I wanted to. I loved spending time with him, and the thought of getting the chance to share such an amazing experience with him seemed like a gift, a chance for us to live out those dreams we’d had in college back when we had fantasized about traveling together, taking on the whole world with each other by our side.

“Yeah, we’ve done our work for the day, haven’t we?” He grinned. “We can just put together a quick report and then send it back off to them. They don’t need to know what we’re actually doing with the rest of our day.”

I paused, still not convinced. What if people saw us together? What if they figured out something was going on? I had no idea if this was the right call, but I didn’t know if I would be able to forgive myself if I skipped out on the chance to do something that sounded so damn exciting.

“I’m game if you’re game,” he told me. With that look on his face, I couldn’t turn him down. I couldn’t deny myself the thrill of doing something this crazy with him. I had never even thought about snorkeling before, but there was a first time for everything.

“Okay, let’s do it,” I replied before I could find some way to talk myself out of it. I could give it a try, even if it was totally out of my comfort zone.

When it came to my comfort zone, he was the only thing I needed to dare push on out of it.

CHAPTER 43



JAX

As we wandered out of the office, the smell of the sea air filled my senses. This could be fun. Yeah, it might not be how we had intended to spend the day, but it was hard to resist when that guy had made it sound like such a good time.

The marina gleamed in the distance, the water almost crystalline blue. The sky above was cloudless, the sun beaming down on top of us.

“Let’s go and check it out,” I told her. “Just see what it’s about, right? Can’t do us any harm.”

“Yeah, let’s check it out,” she agreed, her voice bubbling with excitement. She seemed a whole lot more open to spontaneity now that we were out here in Athens, as though she had left the version of her who was caught up on work back in New York. I liked all the versions of her, but this one seemed the most free, the most open, the most willing to take on anything that the world threw at her.

We made our way down to the marina and found the snorkeling stand soon enough. The woman running it smiled when she saw us coming, as though she knew she had found new marks. She waved us over.

“You interested?” she asked me as she looked between the two of us. “Money off for honeymooning couples, you know?”

My mind raced. It might be a bit of a risk to play it like this, but if it meant we got some money off, it was worth a try.

I smiled at her. “Really?” I replied, as though the mere thought of it surprised me. I reached out for Morgan’s hand, holding on tight. “That’s crazy because we’re here on our honeymoon, right, Morgan?”

I could feel her stiffen with surprise beside me, but she nodded, probably

figuring it was better to play it like this. She knew better than to argue with me when I had a plan in mind, and she wasn't going to undercut me when she knew it might save us money. Even though neither of us struggled for cash now, we still had that hangover of being broke students, and both of us looked to save money wherever we could.

"We are," she replied. I could hear the tone in her voice, could tell she was trying not to laugh, and I silently willed her to hold herself together. If she started giggling, she was going to give us away, and I doubted this woman was going to be very pleased if she found out I had been trying to scam her.

"Well, congratulations!" she exclaimed. "That's beautiful. How long have you guys been together?"

"Oh, more years than I can count now," Morgan cut in, playing along with the game I had set up. Whenever we were working together on something or aiming at the same goal, it was like we came together into one mind. We were totally on the same wavelength, and it felt like I could have plucked thoughts straight from her head and guided them back to mine.

"But he finally went ahead and put a ring on this finger," Morgan replied. When the woman looked down at her hand, clearly planning to admire whatever wedding ring she had gotten, Morgan sighed. "Even though he couldn't manage to get a ring that fit," she said, shaking her head. "Ridiculous, right? I'm still waiting for it to be resized."

I chuckled. Even when we were just playing, she still made herself out to be the one who had everything together. Honestly, I had to admire it.

"Yes, that one was on me," I replied. "But maybe this could make up for it?" I glanced hopefully at the woman, as though getting her in on my side with this.

She smiled, nodded. "I can book you in for tomorrow morning at dawn. The water's clear first thing in the morning, and you can get a clear look at all the wildlife."

"Sounds perfect," I replied, nodding. "Doesn't it, honey?"

I squeezed her hand, and for a moment, I wasn't sure where the line between reality and fiction lay. When I looked over at her, pretending to be her husband, it all felt so natural. More natural than it should have. As though this was what we were meant to be doing, as though this was where we belonged. The two of us, together, as a couple.

"It does," she agreed smoothly. I wondered if she was feeling the same

way I was right now, if she was dealing with the same tingling excitement I happened to be. Did this feel as right to her as it did to me? I had no idea. And I knew I wasn't going to risk anything by coming out and asking it.

"I'll get you two booked in for tomorrow morning then," she told us, and she pulled out a notebook and jotted something down in it. "What name should I put you under?"

"Jaxson," I replied. "Mr. and Mrs."

Morgan let out a little snort. She was having a hard time playing this off. She covered it up with a cough quickly, making sure she didn't reveal more than she meant to.

"We'll see you then," I told the woman, and we turned to make our way out of the marina and back to the street. Morgan craned to look over her shoulder and then pulled her hand away from mine quickly, laughing and shaking her head.

"You need to warn me when you pull something like that!" she protested. "You can't just expect me to play along when you hit me with something as out there as that."

"As us being married?" I replied. There had been a time when it had seemed like the perfect endgame for me, the perfect place to take our relationship, the perfect romance I wanted to last the rest of my life. Damn, I still had the ring hidden away in my place, not that she had any idea of it even existing.

"Yeah, I almost blew our cover!" she exclaimed. "Besides, it's not like we can't afford the full fee."

"Hey, I always say, if you can get money off, do it," I replied with a shrug. "That's how you stay comfortable, right? Taking whatever savings you can get."

"Even if it means lying to that poor woman about our honeymoon," she replied, shaking her head. "I feel like that's bad luck."

"Maybe," I replied. "Guess we'll find out tomorrow when we go snorkeling, right?"

"Guess so," she agreed, and her hand brushed against mine once more.

I wondered if she was considering holding it again, if her instincts were nudging her to reach out and take it. If they were, she was doing a good job hiding it.

We arrived back at the hotel a little later, strolling the streets together for a while to get a feel for the area we were in. There was so much to explore, I

hardly knew where to start, but the ocean seemed as good a place as any.

“I really love it here,” she said as we paused outside the hotel to look around. Even though the building itself was luxurious, the cobbled streets, lit by the dimming rays of the afternoon sun, were even more striking. A few trees dipped in the breeze as though they were bowing to someone.

“Me too,” I replied, and I glanced at my watch. “You want to go get something to eat? We could split some dishes again, like we did last time.”

She paused for a moment before she answered, hesitating slightly. I could see she was struggling to put into words exactly what was in her head. Was she still thrown by my fake marriage ploy back there? It had been nothing more than an attempt to get us some money off. Did I need to make that even more clear to her?

“I think I should get some rest,” she replied. “It’s been a long day. And if we’ve got to be up early tomorrow, I want to be well rested so I can really enjoy it all.”

“Good idea,” I replied, though I was a little let down. I got it. I did. She needed her rest, with all the traveling we’d been doing. But I couldn’t help but wonder if she was pulling back from me on purpose after I had turned her down the night before.

“Thanks,” she replied, and she looked relieved that I wasn’t going to push it any further than I already had.

I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable, but hell, it was going to be hard sleeping in the room next to her and not getting my hands on her. I’d already gone one night without sleeping with her, and spending the day with her had only made it harder for me to contain myself. Seeing her in that light dress skimming her body, knowing how perfect she was underneath, had my palms itching to touch her.

“I’ll walk you back to your room,” I offered.

She cocked an eyebrow at me. “That would probably be a more significant bit of gentlemanliness if you weren’t already staying right next door,” she shot back, smiling playfully.

“Hey, let me have this,” I replied.

She tipped her head to the side, gazing up at me. “The very least my brand-new husband can do, right?”

We made our way upstairs toward the rooms. She paused outside her door as though she might have been having second thoughts about leaving me alone for the evening. She parted her lips as though there was something she

wanted to say to me but then thought better of it, shaking her head.

“Goodnight,” she murmured, and she leaned up to give me a quick kiss on the cheek. The brush of her lips against my skin nearly lit up something I couldn’t push down, but I hurriedly pulled myself together, stepping back to put some distance between us before she could read too much into the expression on my face.

“Sleep well,” I told her. “You’re going to need all your energy for snorkeling tomorrow, right?”

“Exactly,” she agreed. “I’m just going to type up these reports and get some sleep.”

“Reports?”

“From the meeting we had today,” she reminded me, shaking her head at me. “You already forget what we’re meant to be doing here, Jax?”

“You got me,” I replied with a grin. “Guess someone’s been making it hard to keep my head in the game.”

Her cheeks flushed a little pink. God, I loved to see her respond to me like that, loved to see her unable to hide her attraction to me. It made me feel a little less crazy for the need that seemed to burn inside me for her, the need I was having a harder and harder time denying with every passing day.

She slipped into her room before I could say anything else, and I waited until the door was shut and took a deep breath. I would have done anything to just be able to follow her in there, pull her into my arms, kiss her, and tell her I couldn’t resist her any longer. Hell, maybe even play out the fake honeymoon night I had made up to that woman.

But it was better for us to hold back. All this anticipation was only going to make it even better when we eventually fell into bed once more. And I knew that was coming. I knew it was only a matter of time before one or both of us cracked, and we had to make the move.

I stepped into my room, letting out a long sigh, and headed straight for the shower. A cold one tonight, something to scrub off the memory of her as best I could.

As the cool water rushed over my body, I closed my eyes and imagined what it was going to be like for us to go snorkeling together, just spend some time with each other doing something light and fun. Maybe I would get to see her in a swimsuit. Not that that was going to make it any easier for me to hold myself back.

Damn, I was down bad for this girl. Maybe even worse than I had been

when we had first been together. Because that desire, that attraction, it had a history now and I knew what it meant to lose it. I knew how nobody else could match up to her. I couldn't deny how obvious it was. No matter how many women I had been with since we had last been together, none had come close to her.

Now we were starting something again, and I wasn't going to let it slip through my fingers.

CHAPTER 44



MORGAN

When I woke the next morning, I was a little less exhausted than I had been before. Enough so that, when I stepped out of bed and saw the sun starting to rise through the windows, I smiled. I couldn't wait to get out there and find out what this place had to offer me. I knew today was going to be a whole lot of fun, if only for the adventure the two of us were about to go on.

There was a knock at the door and I headed over to answer it. When I saw him waiting on the other side, I beamed. He was wearing a light tee and had a pair of shades hooked over the collar, and he looked hot as hell.

"You ready to have some breakfast?" he asked.

"Yeah, need to fuel up for that snorkeling trip," I replied, biting my lip with excitement. I could hardly wait. I had no idea what it was going to entail, but I couldn't wait to find out.

"My thoughts exactly," he agreed. "Come on, let's get downstairs and eat."

We made our way down to the restaurant, which was serving up a delicious breakfast that had my mouth watering as soon as I stepped through the door. I ate bacon and eggs and fresh bread, tearing off chunks as my appetite returned from yesterday. I had been so focused on making sure I took care of work, I had almost forgotten to have anything for dinner, raiding the minifridge in the middle of the night for whatever I could find.

The sun had just risen as we made our way out of the hotel, and the streets were quieter than I had ever seen them. I inhaled the smell of the sea air, the bite of the salt washing away all the cobwebs that had built up overnight, as we headed to the marina where we would be snorkeling from.

He slipped his hand into mine as we walked, and I didn't pull back. I

didn't want to. There was something so sweet about his touch, it always made me feel more grounded. And besides, it was early enough that nobody was going to see us together.

"We need to convince her we're actually a couple," he reminded me, flashing me a brief smile. I nodded.

"Right, of course," I replied, and he gave my hand a squeeze as though to assure me there was more to it than that.

We arrived at the marina, and the woman who had booked us in the day before was already waiting for us, grinning as she saw us approaching.

"Perfect, you're here right on time," she told us, gesturing to the boat bobbing in the clear water beside us. "Please, step on board, and we can get you changed into your equipment."

He helped me onto the boat, not letting go of my hand until I was safely onboard, and the captain nodded to us in greeting—an older man with a heavily lined face, weathered by the sun, a shirt unbuttoned nearly down to his navel.

"This way," the woman told us, and she led us into a small enclosed area in the middle of the boat as we pulled away from the marina. The waters around us were still and quiet, the only sound the waves lapping at the sides of the boat and the low hum of the engine.

"Alright, so let me run you through the safety procedures," the woman began, and she started out by telling us everything we would need to know to stay safe—how to breathe through the tube, how to get on our wetsuits, how to signal if we were having a hard time for whatever reason. I did my best to take it all in. Honestly, I was a little nervous, even though I knew I had no reason to be. They wouldn't have offered this as a service if there was any real danger, and I wanted to just relax and enjoy the experience.

We changed into our wetsuits, and I turned my back to him as I got changed.

"Hey, I've seen it all before," he teased me, and I fired a look at him.

"Doesn't mean I want you to see anything now," I replied, though honestly, the thought of him seeing something didn't really bother me. I could tell he was excited. And feeling the thrill coming off him lifted my spirits, too. It reminded me of all those days we had spent talking about what we were going to do with our travels when we got the chance—when it was like the world had been at our fingertips and we could have done anything at all we wanted to.

We made our way back out onto the small deck as the boat bobbed to a halt, and the captain unfurled a ladder to allow us to climb into the crystal-clear water below.

“You go first,” I told Jax. I wanted to see how he took it so I could tell what my reaction was going to be. I knew I was going to have to just swallow my nerves and go ahead and jump in soon, but at least I’d have an idea of how he got on before I plunged in.

“You don’t have to tell me twice,” he replied, and he grabbed the ladder and lowered himself down into the water.

“Careful, don’t get more than a few feet away from the boat,” the woman called to him as he lowered his face down into the water and let his body bob upward. After a few moments, he lifted his head and pushed his mask back so he could speak to me.

“You’ve got to come in here, Morgan,” he told me. “It’s incredible. The water’s so clear.”

I took a deep breath and made sure my mask was properly secured over my face. The last thing I wanted was to get a mouthful of seawater on my first attempt, right? I climbed down the ladder, dipping my legs into the warm water, and then I let myself go.

It took me a moment to get my bearings, the strange new gravity of the water bobbing me back and forth for a moment as I got a grip, but then, I followed the instructions we had been given back in the cabin and dipped my face down into the water.

As soon as I got a look at the wonderland just below me, I felt my breath escape my lungs for a moment. This place was incredible. The water was a clear, almost crystalline blue. It looked like it belonged in a storybook or a fairytale. And below us, all manner of fish and wildlife were skittering back and forth, darting this way and that around me as though I was just part of the scenery now. None of them seemed scared or put off by our presence, barely even paying attention to us.

One small school of brightly colored fish swam past me one by one, so orange it looked as though they had been covered in poster paint. I followed them, kicking the fins on my feet to make my way after them. I soon caught up to Jax, and he reached out his hand to mine, brushing his fingers against my own as though silently sharing this incredible moment with me.

I soon got used to breathing through the tube and found myself lost to the incredible sights laid out below us. I couldn’t believe any of this was real. It

felt like a fantasy I had come up with, something impossible and distant, so far removed from my real life back in New York. I followed fish, checked out candy-colored chunks of coral, watching as seaweed swayed this way and that right before my eyes. I couldn't believe how clear and warm the water was, especially as the sun cut through the surface and picked out the most beautiful details right there in front of me.

I wasn't sure how long had passed with my head beneath the water, the soft waves lapping around me. My mind was totally set on the images in front of me, the gorgeous sights I was getting to check out up close and personal. This was stuff I would normally only ever see in a nature documentary on some channel I switched to in the middle of the night when I was trying to sleep, but seeing it here in front of me, I knew I would never forget it. I would never have thought to do something like this myself, but I was so glad I had agreed to it.

So glad I had gone with Jax and let him call the shots for a while.

After a good amount of time, I lifted my head from the water and turned to see the boat was a few dozen yards from me. I groaned silently. I knew I was going to get told off by the woman who ran this thing. She had said not to get more than a few feet away from the boat.

And then, I realized everyone on board was waving at me frantically. Jax amongst them, as though they were trying to attract my attention. I frowned, strained my ears to try and hear them, but I couldn't make out what they were saying over the sound of the water.

All at once, Jax dived back in and began swimming quickly toward me. My heart bounced up in my chest, panic gripping my system. What was going on? I spun around, and with a shock of dread, I saw something cutting through the water a few feet away from me.

A fin, moving around the surface. I couldn't see whatever it was attached to, but I already knew the only thing that would have caused them to freak out the way they were right now. I began to kick my fins, hurrying back toward Jax, and he met me halfway, grabbing me and pulling me into his arms.

"It's a shark," he told me, his voice as calm as he could keep it. "They usually don't go for humans, but I'd rather not take the risk."

"Agreed," I replied, my whole body trembling. We raced back to the boat, and Jax made sure to get me up the ladder first before he followed, both of us landing, panting, back on the boat.

As I expected, I got a scolding from the woman running it, but the captain was quick to get us out of there and start heading back to the marina. I turned to watch as the fin began to recede into the distance, and I planted a hand on my chest to try and cool the pounding of my heart.

“Holy shit,” I muttered, shaking my head. “Did I just... was that a shark?”

“It was,” he replied, wrapping his arms around me protectively. He had jumped into that water without a second thought to come after me, even though he was putting himself at risk in the process. He hadn’t even thought twice. I knew he would brush it off if I tried to point that out to him, but it warmed my heart to know he had been so willing to come in after me, as though he didn’t need any reason to put himself between me and a damn shark.

“So do I get to tell people that I’ve survived a shark attack now?” I joked, my voice still slightly shaky as I did my best to gather myself.

“Oh, yeah, I think you do,” he replied as he squeezed me close. It was like he didn’t plan to let go of me for the rest of the day, didn’t want to let me out of his sight, if he could avoid it.

And as I rested my head against his shoulder and watched the water rolling out into the horizon around us, I knew I didn’t want him to, either.

CHAPTER 45



JAX

“This place is beautiful.” Morgan sighed as she leaned back to look out over the ocean view in front of us. “I can’t believe we were just out there this morning.”

“Me neither,” I agreed, though she was the only thing I was looking at right then.

The meeting we’d been meant to have with the Greek brand had been moved back, which had given us the rest of the day to spend with one another, and I didn’t want to waste a single moment of it. We’d gone for a walk around the city in the afternoon, and, once we’d headed back to the hotel to wash the seawater out of our hair, we’d come to a gorgeous restaurant on the beach for fresh seafood and some of the best wine I’d ever tasted.

This was what I had envisioned when I’d heard the two of us were going to be traveling together, a chance to indulge ourselves in all this luxury, a chance for me to give her everything I’d wanted to when we had been dating the first time around. I might not have been able to afford it then, but now? Yeah, now, it was different. Now, I could give her everything, and I was determined to do just that.

I slipped my hand to hers on top of the white-clothed table. We were between dinner and dessert right now, and I was already looking for ways to make sure this night kept going a little longer. I was enjoying myself a lot, sharing all of this with her, and though some part of me wanted to get her back to the hotel already, I didn’t want to rush it. We had the whole evening ahead of us, and I wanted to make the most of it I could.

“You know, we don’t have to pretend to be a married couple anymore,”

she reminded me, but she was smiling. She enjoyed it as much as I did. Maybe it was skirting a little too close to dangerous to be getting this close to each other in public, but when I looked into her eyes, I knew I didn't have it in me to fight the way I felt for her. I just wanted her. Every part of her. I was falling for her, all over again, and it was happening so fast I knew I wasn't going to be able to stop it.

"The snorkeling was amazing," she remarked as she reached for her wine and cast a look out over the water beyond us. "I never would have thought to do something like that by myself."

"Yeah, it was incredible," I agreed. I could still remember the sight of those almost neon fish cutting through the water, the way they darted back and forth in front of us as though they had places to be.

"Though I could have done without the shark," I added.

She laughed. "I think you guys were more freaked out by it than I was. I barely even saw it before you came out to get me."

"Does that mean I don't get points for saving you?" I sighed, shaking my head. It hadn't even taken a second for me to get back in the water and go in after her. When I saw that thing getting closer to her, nothing could have kept me back from getting her to the boat again, to safety. Even though they had said the sharks virtually never went for humans, there wasn't a chance in hell I was going to risk it and find out. The need to protect her had kicked in before I could stop it, and I wouldn't have changed a thing.

"I think you still get a few," she replied playfully.

"Hmm, so it wasn't all in vain," I joked back.

"You only did that so you could get the credit?" she replied, planting her hand on her chest as though she couldn't believe I would be so selfish. "Now I don't even know what to think."

I laughed. It was so good, seeing her starting to relax like that, starting to kick back and just enjoy herself. She had seemed a little nervous the day before, but all of that was gone now, all of it distant as we sat there and sipped our wine together over dinner. It was a date, no way either of us could deny that, but instead of feeling stressed about everything being perfect the way I might have with anyone else, I could just relax when it was the two of us. I knew what she liked, I didn't have to take random guesses and hope for the best, and knowing I could give her everything she wanted made me happy.

The food had been delicious, fresh from the sea, rich with those salty

flavors that seemed to fill my senses every time I took a bite. She enjoyed every mouthful too, tucking in like it was her last meal.

“Beats those slices of crappy pizza we used to get after we went out for the night, huh?” I remarked to her as our first course was cleared away.

She laughed. “Hey, I still think those have a time and a place,” she protested, shaking her head.

Our dessert was light, a parfait dotted with fresh fruit and drizzled with a delicious local honey, the perfect way to finish off the most delicious dinner. She stole one of the figs from my plate and popped it into her mouth, and the sight of the soft fruit gliding around her lips stirred something in me, something I should have known better than to indulge right now.

“It’s getting late,” she remarked, glancing down at her phone. “Maybe we should think about getting back to the hotel?”

Even though her words were innocent from the outside, I knew what she meant by them. I had turned her down on that first night, and there was no way in hell I was going to make the same mistake again, not for anything, not a chance. I wanted her. I had to have her. And I wasn’t going to let anything get in the way of it, no matter what it took.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I agreed, the corners of my lips turning up. I needed her to know I heard her. I heard what she was getting at, heard the words she wasn’t quite saying out loud. She didn’t need to, not with me. We had known each other long enough to be able to cut to the chase without spelling it out for each other.

I waved the waiter over and paid the bill. She pouted at me playfully.

“You know I can afford this, right?” she remarked, shaking her head. “You don’t need to pay for me like that.”

“I know I don’t need to,” I replied. “But I want to. That okay?”

“Guess I can allow it,” she agreed, her eyes flashing with amusement. God, I wanted nothing more than to lean across the table and kiss her right here, right now, right in front of anyone who might have been watching.

Once the bill was paid, we started on our way back to the hotel, and she slipped her arm casually through mine. All these small touches, though they might have seemed casual to anyone looking in our direction, were laced with meaning to me. I could feel her pressing herself against me, as though she couldn’t resist it, as though she couldn’t stand the thought of being anywhere other than by my side.

In the cooling streets of Athens in the evening, it was as though we were

in a different world, a world where we didn't have to worry about what anyone thought of us, what KICKS would have said if they'd found out about what we were doing. I probably should have been a little more careful, but the wine and the scent of the sea and the sight of her smile were making it hard to think straight. How could I be expected to act right when she looked that good, when I couldn't imagine being here with anyone else?

She paused to look out over the beach as we made our way back to the hotel, and I hung back a moment just to look at her. God, she was gorgeous. The way the light breeze lifted her hair from her face, it made her look younger than I'd ever seen her, so free and so at ease with herself and the world around her. I didn't know if anyone in the world could have been more beautiful to me in that moment.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?" she asked, glancing around to smile at me. As I met her gaze, I nodded.

"Yeah," I agreed. "It really is."

We closed the distance to the hotel, and I walked her back to her room, just like I had done on the other nights here. But this time, I had a plan. This time, I had a need I knew I wasn't going to be able to deny, and I was ready to indulge it.

We reached her door where she took out her keycard and started to go in. She turned to look up at me, her teeth resting lightly on her bottom lip. She knew what that did to me, the look in her eyes when she gazed at me like that. I reached up, pushed a strand of hair back from her face, letting my fingers trace down over her cheek. She shivered slightly, closing her eyes and tilting her head toward my touch. Her eyes softened, almost closing, as my thumb grazed over her bottom lip just the way her teeth had.

"I want you to come to bed with me, Jax," she murmured, and her voice left no room for argument.

Not that I was going to. It felt like everything we had done today had been leading to this moment, to the look in her eyes, to the way she spoke to me like she couldn't hold back. Those words slipped from her lips so easily, I knew she had been holding them back all day.

I didn't answer, but I leaned in to plant a kiss against her lips at last. And with that, a dam broke. All the desire I'd been trying to push down as long as we were still pretending to be professional took control of me.

She wound her arms around me as I pushed my hands into her hair, backing her against the door. The two of us pressed together as we kissed

properly for the first time in what felt like forever. I had held back, denied myself, but here, now, with her telling me how badly she wanted me, I knew there was no way I could hold back.

I turned us around so the door would close behind us as we stumbled into the room. She hung on to me for dear life, giggling as we both made our way toward the bed. I couldn't stop kissing her, holding her face in my hands and kissing her lips, her cheeks, her chin, her nose, everything I could reach. I wanted to gorge myself on her, wanted to forget everything else we had going on right now and focus on the taste of her wine-stained lips beneath mine. I adored her. I couldn't get enough of her.

And I knew, as we fell onto the bed together, that this night was going to be one that neither of us would ever forget.

CHAPTER 46



MORGAN

I gasped as he trailed his mouth to my neck, his hot breath on my skin. I couldn't resist him, and he knew it. He knew exactly what to do, exactly how to touch me, exactly what I needed from him. I couldn't deny it, couldn't hide from it, couldn't hold back on the want that coursed through me. He was just too damn sexy for me to resist.

His hands moved all over my body, stripping off the dress I had thrown on for dinner and tossing it aside. I hadn't bothered with underwear beneath it, and, as soon as he saw how naked I was, he let out a groan.

"If I'd known you weren't wearing anything under this, I'd have brought you back here a lot sooner," he breathed into my ear.

I grinned as I turned my head to kiss him once more. Our lips caressed each other as he pulled off his shirt, tossing it aside, and I reached for his jeans, undoing the zip and tugging it down so I could take his cock into my hand.

I had been craving him all night, ever since I had seen him in that wetsuit this morning. I wasn't sure how long I would have been able to resist him, even if I'd tried. There was something about the way he looked, something about the way he moved, something about the way he ran his hands over me when he held me close that drove me crazy. When he'd wrapped his arms around me on the boat, holding me close and keeping me safe, I had known I could trust him with anything. Even my life.

I pushed down his jeans and underwear while he kicked them off, our bodies moving against one another with a needy hunger as we made out with each other. His tongue in my mouth, his hands on my hips, he kissed me like he never wanted to stop.

I could feel his cock nudging at my hip, and I groaned, unable to put into words just how much I wanted him. I wanted him to fuck me. We hadn't done it since we had arrived in Greece, and I felt like I had waited long enough.

"You want me to fuck you bare?" he murmured in my ear, almost teasing me, as though he was going to pass up the chance.

"Mmm," I moaned in agreement knowing I was clean and I trusted him to be too, squeezing my thighs against him, pulling him toward me. He reached down, taking his cock in his hand, and I spread my legs so I could watch him push it inside me.

The sight of him entering me turned me on like nothing else in the world, and I arched my back, feeling my whole body stiffen as he pushed inside me. All the tension, all the pressure that had built up over all this time, it was finally released, released in the feeling of him pushing into me.

"You feel so fucking good," he moaned, and he pulled me in for another kiss as he slipped all the way into me. The fullness felt perfect, and he just held himself there for a long moment, as though he was savoring the sensation of me against his cock.

And then, he began to move inside of me, fucking me in long, deep strokes that made my toes curl with delicious pleasure. I was panting now, breathing hard, and I wrapped my arms around him and hung on for dear life. He knew just what he was doing, just how I liked it. How many times had we fucked like this over the course of my life? And he seemed to remember each and every one, judging by how damn good he still was.

I tipped my head back onto the pillow, and he planted a kiss against my neck, brushing his tongue over my throat. I could feel his teeth grazing against my skin, just slightly, like the shark that had been circling me earlier. I gasped, pushing myself against him, moving back against him so I could take him in even deeper. My body was demanding it. I couldn't deny myself this, how badly I wanted his body, his touch, his cock buried all the way to the hilt inside me.

He slowed slightly, grinding into me in circles, massaging my clit as he fucked me. I could feel my vision blurring, my eyes rolling back slightly as I tried to control myself, but I couldn't, not even if I wanted to. He drove me to the point of no return, the point where nothing made sense and everything fell away. It was why I loved being with him so much. He made it so nothing else mattered, and I couldn't get enough of it.

“Fuck,” he groaned as he reached down to grab my wrists, and then guided them up over my head. He pushed them down to the pillow above me, staring down at me, as he held me there, as though he was trying to remember exactly what I looked like in that moment—exactly how I looked as I gazed right up at him, my body needing him, my mind craving him. I didn’t take my eyes off of him, his gaze burning into mine before he kissed me again and started to move harder inside me.

I could feel myself getting close, the pleasure getting beyond that point of no return. The orgasm was taking me over, the shock of it, the pleasure of it. I could feel it boiling up from between my legs to consume my whole body, and I knew it wouldn’t take much more for me to go over the edge and into that delicious, much-needed release.

And then it hit me. The orgasm shuddered through my body, my lips parting against his as I cried out, my body arching against his to take him in deeper, deeper, even deeper than before. My pussy clenched around his cock, drawing him in, drawing him deep, and he held himself there, letting me enjoy every ounce of pleasure as I came against him.

Seconds later, I felt him reach his own release inside me, his body contracting on top of mine as he came. I heard the groan escape his lips as he finished, and knowing I had gotten him off so hard sent another shockwave of pleasure through my body. I couldn’t control myself, couldn’t have even if I wanted to. He just knew exactly what I needed, exactly what I craved.

He held himself there for a long moment before he slowly eased himself back, pulling out of me and letting me catch my breath as he released my hands above me. He planted one more kiss on my cheek before he collapsed into bed beside me, breathing hard. I could see that his body was sheened with sweat, and I grinned as I turned to face him.

“Damn, Morgan,” he panted, as he closed his eyes, trying to bring himself back down to Earth. “That was...”

“Some of the best sex we’ve ever had?” I finished up for him, and he grinned cockily as he looked over at me.

“Hey, you’re the one who said it, not me,” he replied.

I laughed. “Shit, I shouldn’t boost your ego like that,” I shot back. I knew what he was like, what an ego he had on him at the best of times. I had probably just caused even more problems, letting him think he was the shit for the way he had just made me come.

But when it felt as good as that, who the hell was I to complain? I loved

being with him. Loved having sex with him. The two of us made sense in a way I had never been able to recreate with anyone else. I had never been able to even come close. He knew just how to touch me, how to hold me, to make me feel wanted and desired, and I wouldn't have changed a damn thing about it.

We both caught our breath for a moment, trying to come back down. When we were together, it was like we left the planet, and it took a hot second to remember the rest of the world even existed.

The rest of the world that might not have been too happy if they found out what the two of us had just done.

I knew I probably should have been a little more careful about this, a little more restrained, but how exactly was I supposed to control myself when he looked at me the way he did? When he made me feel like he did?

I turned to face him, brushing my hand over his chest. He was so strong, I could see the muscles beneath his skin, and I wondered idly how he found time to hit the gym so much when he must have been so busy with work.

“What are you thinking about?” he asked me as he reached down to brush my hair back from my face. These little tender touches from him were my favorite. They brought me back to when we had been together the first time around, when it had been as though we were the only things in the world that existed.

“Just how glad I am you're here right now,” I told him softly. “I know we said we shouldn't, but...” I trailed off. Was there a follow-up to that? I had no idea. I just wanted to be here with him, in the quiet and comfort of his company. Even if we should have known better, it was so nice to just lie in bed next to him, listen to the sound of his breathing, the way his chest rose and fell with a comforting consistency.

“I'm glad,” I finished up. It didn't feel like enough to really sum up how I felt, but it was something, and something was the best I could do right now.

“Me too,” he replied, and he stretched his arm out over the bed, gesturing for me to come curl up next to him. I didn't need telling twice. I moved in close to him, closing my eyes and resting my head on his shoulder, inhaling the scent of him. He still smelled a little like seawater, a little like the fancy wine we had been drinking while we had been out to dinner, but underneath it all, he smelled like him. That warm, musky scent that surrounded me when we were together, that made everything else just vanish. How could I care about a damn thing that was happening out of that door when he was here,

with me, and the two of us were just wrapped up in each other as though it was the most obvious thing in the world?

He pressed his face into my head, inhaling the scent of my hair, and didn't say anything. He didn't need to. I was sure I could tell what was going on in his mind right now anyway. It was the same thing that was rushing through mine. All these questions about where we were going to go next, and the acceptance that, right now, all that mattered was that we were here.

All that mattered was that we were together again, and the whole world, as far as I was concerned, could wait.

CHAPTER 47



JAX

When I woke the next morning, it was to the weight of her in my arms. Before I so much as opened my eyes, I had a smile on my face.

“Hey,” she greeted me as she lifted her head from the pillow, frowning with tiredness.

“Hey,” I murmured, kissing the corner of her mouth softly. I loved seeing her like this. There was something profoundly intimate about seeing someone first thing in the morning, especially someone who always seemed to work so hard to have everything together the way she did. I doubted she’d let many people get this close to her, see this side of her, and I loved it.

Maybe loved more than just that, too.

“What time is it?” she asked, her voice still a bit croaky.

“It’s nearly eight,” I replied. “We should probably get out to that meeting soon.”

“Oh, shit, yeah,” she groaned. “I almost forgot about that.”

“Oh, yeah?” I teased lightly. “Did I wipe your memory last night?”

“Hey, don’t get too cocky,” she protested, but I could tell from the smile on her face that she didn’t really mind my attitude, maybe even enjoyed it to some extent. She had always grumbled when I let my ego get involved, but in truth, I knew it didn’t bother her as much as she said it did.

“You want a shower?” I asked, and she yawned and rubbed a hand over her face.

“I should probably have one,” she admitted. She climbed out of bed to grab her clothes, and I leaned back in bed and watched her. God, she was so fucking sexy. The way the morning light played on her body, picking out the details of her, the curve of her waist, the slight jut of her hip, I could have

laid in bed and watched her all day long.

“What is it?” she asked once she noticed me looking.

I shook my head. “Nothing. You just look good, that’s all. Really, really fucking good.”

She grinned. “Don’t distract me before I’ve even had a chance to take a shower,” she told me, and she ducked into the bathroom to get ready for the day ahead of us.

It was our last meeting with the company, and I was looking forward to getting it over and done with. Really, so I could spend some more time with her, though I would never have said it out loud. I wasn’t sure what we were going to do tonight, if she was going to brush off the thought of spending it with me again, but I hoped we could at least share a bed once more. Waking up with her tomorrow already sounded appealing, and, with nowhere to be, maybe I could enjoy that shower with her. Right now, I had to get my head in the game and that meant getting my own self cleaned up, so I got dressed and headed back to my room to get ready for the day.

We headed into the office and got through the meeting, filling up a whole page with notes and consulting with the advertising department to get an idea what the best approach for this project would be for their market. It was actually really interesting to hear what worked over here, given how little I knew about the business in Greece. Once again, Morgan and I bounced off each other with ease, throwing ideas out there and sharing comments in between our meetings.

Once we had passed on the information to the KICKS reps back in America, we were free for the rest of the evening.

“Do you want to grab dinner?” I asked.

“How about we have it back at the hotel?” she suggested. “I’m kind of tired.”

“Of course,” I agreed, my mood brightening at once. Spending time at the hotel together probably meant we were going to get a chance to share a bed once more. It was crazy how much I was looking forward to it. I felt like a teenager again, happy to have any part of her to myself, happy to be able to share a bed with her. I wasn’t sure what it was about this woman, but she made it impossible for me to think straight.

We wandered around the city to find some food, picking up fresh cheese and figs and honey from a local vendor and bringing it back to her room. We sat out on the balcony together, sharing the impromptu feast we had put

together and looking out over the sea beyond us.

“I can’t believe we have to go home tomorrow.” Morgan sighed, leaning back in her seat as she took a sip of the wine we’d grabbed from the hotel bar.

“Yeah, me neither,” I agreed, and I glanced at her. Of course, there was one thing in particular I wanted to ask her about, something specific I knew we needed to get off our chests if we were going to do this, but I wasn’t sure how to put it into words without scaring her off.

I didn’t want to rush this, but I needed to know she saw everything I did, that she felt everything I felt. Even though this was new and fresh, I needed to lock it down, needed to make sure she was on the same page as me. If this was nothing more than a vacation fling to her, it was better for me to know now than it was to go back to New York wishing for something I didn’t even know if I could get.

“What’s going to happen when we get back?” she asked me as though reading my mind.

“What’s going to happen with...?”

“With us,” she explained, glancing over at me. I could hear the nerves in her voice, and it was clear she wasn’t sure how I was going to respond. As though it would have been with anything other than total certainty, as though I ever could have gone any other way with her.

“What do you want to happen?” I asked her carefully. If we were going to talk about this, then I wanted her to be honest with me. I didn’t want her to be influenced by anything I had to say on the matter. I needed it to come from her, just her.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, I love—I like what we’re doing here. It’s been really nice getting to know you and our chemistry is still there.”

“Is that a polite way of saying the sex is still good?” I wondered aloud.

She giggled. “Yeah, I think so,” she replied. “But I know this could impact our work, and we don’t want to let anything get in the way of the contract we have with KICKS.”

“No, for sure,” I agreed. “But it’s not going to last forever. When it’s done, where do you think that’ll leave us?”

She paused for a moment, considering my question. She popped a fig into her mouth, staring out over the horizon beyond us.

“I think I really like spending time with you,” she confessed. “And I don’t

want to have to end this again.”

I grinned. I couldn't help it. It was exactly what I wanted to hear. To know that she was where I was at, to know we shared the same outlook on this. Yes, it might have been crazy to try and retrace our steps, but maybe we could move forward instead. And maybe it would be the best thing for both of us.

“Neither do I,” I agreed. “And when we get back, maybe we just keep this up behind the scenes?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean, we don't let anything happen at the KICKS office again,” I replied. “We keep it strictly professional there. But there's nothing to stop us spending more time together outside of it, right? Getting a feel for what it's like to date again.”

“Date, huh?” she remarked as though she was testing out the word on her tongue. There were so many times when we'd first split up where I would have done anything for her to even consider being with me again, and here, now, it felt almost surreal that she was getting to that point. I had never imagined we would end up here, when I had first seen her again. Hell, if anything, I had hoped I could undercut her, not get back together with her.

“Yeah, I think I'd like that,” she told me finally, a small, shy smile on her face as though she could hardly believe she was saying it either. I had to fight the urge to punch the air. It felt like a win, a huge fucking win, bigger than any contract I'd ever managed to score in my life.

“We have to make sure nobody finds out about it, though, not until the contract is over,” she warned me, and I nodded in agreement.

“Oh, yeah, don't worry. I don't want to blow this any more than you do,” I assured her, and I meant it. I knew the guys would have me for breakfast, lunch, and dinner if they found out I had screwed them out of a win because I couldn't keep my dick in my pants, and I had no intention of bringing that kind of mess down on my head.

“Right,” she agreed, and she bit her lip as she gazed at me. It was as though she couldn't believe this was happening. I knew how she felt. When we had parted ways all those years ago, I could never have convinced myself she would look at me this way ever again, but here she was, right now, staring at me as though she had just laid eyes on me for the first time in her life.

I slid my hand across the table toward her, and she stiffened slightly, still

a little nervous.

“It’s alright,” I promised her. “Nobody’s going to see us out here.”

“You’re right,” she agreed. “I guess I’m just nervous, that’s all.”

“You have nothing to be nervous about,” I assured her, and I grazed my thumb over her hand. She looked down at our fingers locked together and smiled.

“I can’t believe—” she began, but then she shook her head, stopped in her tracks. She didn’t need to say it out loud. I already knew what she was getting at.

I brought her hand to my lips and planted a kiss against it, closing my eyes as I did so. It was like nothing else in the world, being with her. She made me feel like nobody else, and I didn’t want anything to change it.

Yes, it would be different when we got back. We were going to have to be a little more careful about what we got up to, what we did and where we did it. But for these last few hours in Greece, we could just be a couple. We didn’t have to concern ourselves with anything other than each other. And looking at her, I knew I wouldn’t have wanted to, even if we had been back in New York.

This night that we had admitted how we felt about each other again after all these years apart, that we wanted to try again and find out where this took us, it was too precious to give a damn about what anyone else said or did. It was just us.

A cool breeze rustled through the trees around the hotel, and she squeezed my hand tight. Right now, there was nothing left for us to say. We had told each other everything we needed to. Right now, all that mattered was enjoying the rest of our time here.

And maybe taking her to bed once we’d finished this wine.

CHAPTER 48



MORGAN

“God, I hate flying.” I yawned as the plane landed on the tarmac once more. I peered out of the small window, out onto the gray skies above New York, the familiar scent of the city filling my nostrils.

“We have the rest of the day off,” he reminded me, skimming his hand over my arm gently to soothe me. He hadn’t been able to keep his hands off me after the conversation we’d had the night before, about our feelings for each other. I loved it.

Knowing how much he wanted me, how badly he needed me, made me so happy. Knowing he felt the same way I did was a relief, especially given how hard I was falling for him all over again.

“Yeah, and I think I’m going to spend it sleeping.” I laughed.

“You sure you don’t want to come back to my place?” he suggested playfully, cocking his eyebrow slightly.

“Trust me, I wouldn’t be able to keep my eyes open even if I did,” I replied.

He grinned. “That’s fine,” he replied. “Another time.”

“For sure,” I replied, giving his hand a squeeze. I could see one of the flight attendants looking over at us, and I wondered if any of them were reporting back to KICKS. I quickly pulled my hand away. Probably just paranoia on my part, but I would rather be safe than sorry when it came to keeping our relationship on the down-low.

The last thing I wanted was to hurt our new romance by having it get in the way of the contract we were both working on. I knew both of us would have been devastated if we lost it, and I wasn’t sure the fledgling rekindling we had going on would survive such a big hit.

We grabbed our bags—well, the ones I could carry anyway—and headed into the airport. It had been a long flight, and I hadn't been able to get much sleep. And I knew part of this exhaustion was on me, given that I had hardly gotten any rest the night before, too. Because he had been keeping me up. Not that I was complaining. Not when being with him again was as electric and exciting as it was. Nothing could have stopped me from getting my hands on him last night. I just craved him way too deeply, and now that we had admitted our feelings for each other, there would have been no way to deny myself his touch.

Heading down to the airport, he slipped his hand into mine, and I smiled. To anyone else, we would have looked like a regular couple, and I liked the thought of passing for a real couple. It was still a novelty to me. I hadn't been with anyone since we had split up, and the comfort I felt walking around with his hand in mine felt really, really damn good.

In the rush of people around us, I felt like I was going in slow motion, I was so damn tired from the journey. Tomorrow, we were due to go into the KICKS office to run through everything we'd found out, and I was looking forward to getting back to work, even if I felt as though I wouldn't have been able to keep my eyes open if I'd tried today.

Suddenly, as we turned out into the main terminal next to the exit, Jax stopped dead in his tracks. He dropped my hand at once.

"What's wrong?" I asked, confused.

"Is that Ian?" he muttered under his breath, nodding toward someone in the crowd. It took me a second to see what he did, but when I spotted him, my chest clenched with panic.

Oh, shit. What was he doing here? Why was he here right now? Had he seen us holding hands? Could he have been sure of it from this distance anyway?

"Crap," I muttered. "Crap, crap, crap."

"My thoughts exactly," Jax muttered, and I could tell he was panicking as much as I was right now. The last thing I'd wanted was for anyone at KICKS to know about us. I still hadn't looked into their policy on dating, and I needed to before I was willing to let anyone get a sniff of the truth about us. But Ian was standing there, right in front of us, and he could have just seen us holding hands as we walked off the plane, like a comfortable couple.

"We should go talk to him," I told Jax quickly. "The longer we just stand here, the more suspicious it's going to look. Come on."

I started to stride toward Ian, and Jax hurried to keep up with me. He knew I was right. Hiding from it or pretending we didn't see him was just going to get us into more trouble. Maybe I could just bluff, convince him he hadn't seen what he had just witnessed, and put it down to imagination on his part?

"Hi, Ian, great to see you," I greeted him warmly, extending a hand to him and waiting for him to shake it. He took it, and I scanned his face for a reaction. Was he angry? Confused? Had he seen it? I couldn't tell from his face, and it was driving me crazy. I hoped he couldn't tell from looking at me how much I was freaking out right now.

"You didn't have to come meet us at the airport," Jax remarked, and I could hear his voice straining around the edges, as he did all he could not to let his nerves show.

"We wanted to let you know there had been a change to the meeting tomorrow," he replied, his voice cool. "We have something we need to talk to you both about. You'll need to come in a little earlier."

"No problem," I replied at once, though in my head, a million questions were rushing by. What the hell did he need to talk to us about? What had he found out? What did he know, and where was this going? I didn't look over at Jax, but I was certain he was feeling the same way I was, dealing with the same stress I was right now.

"Great, thanks," Ian replied, and with that, he turned and walked off without another word. My heart was pounding in my chest, and as soon as he was out of sight, I turned to Jax.

"What do you think that was all about?" I asked him, and Jax shrugged.

"Guess we're not going to know until tomorrow," he replied.

I knew he was right, and I knew there was no point me overthinking it more than I already had, but that wasn't enough to still the panic inside my head. I just didn't know what I wanted to say to them, if they did know. Did I deny it? Tell them there was nothing happening between us and it was crazy for them to even think about it? Or did I agree? Did I admit to it? Did I come clean about the depths of my feelings for this man, and pray it worked out the way it was supposed to?

"You should get back to your place, get some rest," he told me as though he could sense the panic in my mind right now. I knew he was right. Everything would look better once I'd had a little time to rest, even if it all felt insurmountable right now. I needed to get out of my head, stop myself

obsessing over every little detail. We were together again, that was all that mattered, and everything else, we could handle when we had to.

We caught separate cabs back to our places, and I stared out of the window, eyes fixed on the street outside as I tried my best to keep my mind busy.

I ran through that conversation with Ian a hundred times over the course of that short cab ride. What had been in his mind when we had spoken? What had he been thinking about? What had he thought of us? I wished I could reel back time and ask him.

But it was over now. Whatever he knew, he already knew it. And whatever they wanted to talk to us about tomorrow, it was already set in stone, and there was no way we could pretend otherwise. No matter how much I might have wished I could just brush it all off and put it behind me, I knew I would be tossing and turning for hours before I actually got any rest, wondering, trying to parse out some meaning in what he had said to me.

Shit. I wished I had gone home with Jax instead. Even though it would likely have made things even more obvious, have made the reality of our situation even more blatant to everyone, at least he would have been there to try and soothe my overwrought mind right now. He seemed to be the only one who could do that, the only one who could cut through the stress and panic I always felt and brush it away, if only for a little while.

A skill that I valued more than anything in the world.

I closed my eyes and rubbed my hand over my face in the back of the cab, trying to cool myself off. It wouldn't be long until I was home, and then I could take a long shower and forget about all of this.

But as I slipped beneath the water, the only thing running through my mind was whether we should have made things less obvious when we were over in Greece. I mean, we had posed as a damn married couple. We couldn't have been much more blatant about it if we tried. I couldn't believe how breezy I had felt out there, how light and free, when I could see now I should have been doing everything I could to keep shit under control. No matter how easy it would have been to just forget about all the rules, forget about the reality of our situation, I should have remembered we were on a work trip, and the people who had sent us on it were likely not going to be too happy about us spending most of it getting all lovey-dovey on their dime.

But it had felt like a different world there, and I had felt like a different person—the kind of person who I wanted to be, the kind of person who could

just relax and be with Jax without having to spend most of my time overthinking every little detail of it as I went.

But now that I was back? Yeah, now that I was back, I wasn't sure I was going to get so lucky. And I had no idea what to do with the strange mesh of emotions tearing at my chest as I climbed into bed.

CHAPTER 49



JAX

“**Y**ou still haven’t got this thing done?” I asked Derrick, shaking my head as I stepped into his yard.

“Hey, I thought it was, but then it rained and the top caved in,” Derrick told me, gesturing to the deck I had been working on the other week. “You seem to have the magic touch with this shit. I thought you would know how to handle it.”

“And right after I get back from Greece,” I replied, shaking my head as though I couldn’t believe he would do something like this to me. “Don’t you have any respect for my jetlag?”

“Oh, yeah, of course,” he replied. “How did that go, by the way? How did you get on?”

“I think it went pretty well,” I replied, nodding. “I feel like we got everything they were asking us for. Just a matter of putting it into practice when it comes to the campaign. I think they’re going to do well over there, but they needed assurance that they should sign the deal and make this happen.”

“Good, good,” Derrick replied as he handed me a screwdriver and a set of instructions. “Here, can you make any more sense of this than I can?”

I chuckled, shaking my head. “I should be in bed right now,” I told him. “You’re lucky I’m not abandoning you to this right here and now.”

“What about if I cracked some beers?” he asked. “Would that make it a little more appealing?”

“Yeah, I think you could tempt me with those,” I replied. “It’s the least you can do for payment, right?”

He ducked back inside the house and I set to work checking out the

instructions he'd given me. I shook my head as I looked over them, one eyebrow raised. Why was he having so much trouble with this? I knew he wasn't stupid, but it looked like he didn't have a clue what he was doing here or how to handle putting this deck together.

He emerged with our drinks, and I cracked a beer and set to work. It wasn't that hard, and I got him to serve as my assistant.

"So, what did you guys get up to out there in Greece?" he asked me, glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. I knew what he was getting at, though he wasn't going to say it out loud. He wanted to know if we'd hooked up again. If something had happened.

"Mostly work," I lied quickly, and he laughed.

"Oh, yeah, sure, I believe that," he replied. "Come on, be honest. Did you guys hook up again?"

I couldn't help but smile. "Yeah, we did. But I think... I think it's more than that now, too."

"More than that?"

"Yeah, we talked about what we were going to do when we got back home," I explained. "And we both agreed we want to take this further. We want to give things another shot."

"Damn," he remarked, shaking his head. "You're ready to jump back into it with her? Even after what happened before?"

"I can't let the past get in the way of what I feel now," I replied. "What we have, it's special. I know it's not exactly the perfect time to start over again, but I want to try. I always want to try when it's her."

"You're down bad for this chick." He chuckled, and I shrugged. No point denying it. The truth was the truth. I had fallen for her all over again, even though I never would have guessed this was where we would end up when I'd seen her again. I thought all those feelings were behind us, but they had risen to the surface so fast, and I wouldn't have done a thing to change them.

"You're not worried about working together?" he asked.

"How do you mean?"

"The contract with KICKS," he explained. "If they find out..."

"Yeah, we didn't give them any reason to," I replied.

"You sure about that?"

I hesitated before I answered. Truth was, I had been worried about what Ian had called us in for. I didn't think it would be anything serious, but I had seen the way Morgan had been freaking about it as she had gotten into the

cab to go home, and some of it had rubbed off on me.

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I replied. “I mean, we were kind of together while we were out there, but there’s no reason for them to know any of that. And even if they did, what would they do about it?”

Derrick and I talked, running through everything that had happened while I had been away. I needed his take on all of it, to see if there was anything I could have done that might have sparked the truth to come out. The last thing I wanted was to mess this up because of our budding romance.

“It doesn’t sound like there’s any proof the two of you guys are together,” Derrick remarked finally, once he was satisfied he had sifted through all of the relevant information. I breathed a sigh of relief.

“You think?”

“Yeah, I think so,” he replied. “You don’t want to hurt your chances, but I don’t think you have.”

“If it means being with her, I don’t care about my chances with KICKS,” I replied before I had a chance to think about what I was saying.

He turned to me, surprise all over his face. “Not exactly something you want to say to someone you work with,” he joked. “But that’s a big statement. You think she’d do the same for you?”

I paused, considering.

“She’s worked so hard to get where she is, that’s what you said,” Derrick pointed out. “You think she’d walk away from all of that? Or let you walk away from it?”

I shook my head. “She would never ask me to,” I replied. “Never. And I wouldn’t ask her to, either. We both know that about each other.”

He nodded, though I could tell he had his doubts. He had never felt for someone the way I felt for her, though. I understood it. If he had come to me saying the same stuff I was to him, I was sure I would have thought the same thing.

“Sounds like you’re changing your ways for this girl,” he remarked, laughing. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard you talk about a woman like this.”

Not just this girl—my girl. That was how I thought of her now, my girl, my woman. The woman I had always been meant for, even though we’d spent so much time apart.

But that time apart was what we’d needed. The time to come into being our own people, to achieve everything we wanted to achieve. I was sure we could have done it even if we were still together, but maybe we would have

been too distracted, wrapped up in bed with each other all day long.

Hell, it was hard to think about anything other than her now that we had started this again. And yeah, I still didn't know exactly what the meeting tomorrow was going to bring, but I knew we could get through it, no matter what. As long as we were together. As long as I had her, I could handle it.

I took another sip of my beer and turned my attention back to the mess of the deck in front of me. I knew it was going to take a while to get all of this together, but I was willing to put in the work. Anything to get my mind off the meeting the next day.

And anything to give me a chance to get lost in the thoughts of her, and how much I wanted to see her again.

CHAPTER 50



MORGAN

“Hey, it’s going to be okay,” he assured me, touching the small of my back lightly and trying to soothe me. I knew he just wanted to help, but right now, I felt as though we shouldn’t have let anyone see us together, not when we were standing so close to each other.

“Yeah, I know,” I lied, but truth was, I had been tossing and turning all night long. Worrying about what this meeting was going to be about, exactly. I had no idea what we were walking into, and I hated that feeling of not being ready for what we were about to come up against.

I didn’t know how he could be so calm in the face of it, acting like we had nothing to worry about. Maybe this was just his way of trying to keep his nerves steady. He didn’t want to let the fear sneak in, or it was going to be written all over his face by the time we got into this meeting, and they might think they had something to be suspicious of, even if they hadn’t before.

Of course, I knew I only had myself to blame for all of this. If I had just been able to show a little more self-restraint while we had been in Greece, I wouldn’t have had anything to worry about. But I hadn’t, and now, we were looking down the barrel of something we couldn’t predict. A feeling I tried to avoid whenever I could.

We had met up for a coffee before we were due to go into the KICKS factory, and he had done all he could to try and get me out of my head, but it hadn’t really worked. He must have known how stressed I was, how fearful. If something happened, how was I going to handle it?

What we had between us felt so precious, but it was still so new. Anything could get in the way if we weren’t careful, and that scared the hell out of me. If we lost this job, this contract, because of what we had going on,

would he ever be able to forgive me? I wasn't sure. And could I forgive him if I was the one who had to pay the price?

I had run through the encounter we'd had with Ian the day before over and over again in my head, trying to translate what he knew from the way he had spoken to us. I knew it was pointless, especially when the meeting was happening so soon after we had seen him, but still, I couldn't hide from the nerves right now, couldn't pretend I didn't see what was coming for us. If they had found out about us, we might be walking into the scolding of our lives, and I hated feeling like I was in trouble. It was why I did so much to keep out of it.

And I couldn't help but wonder what Susan would think if she knew what I had been doing, too. I respected her so much, and I wanted her to feel the same way about me, but would she be able to look at me the same way if she knew I had been going out and hooking up with the man I was meant to be working with? Maybe she would think I was trying to use my wiles to get to the top, even though what was happening with Jax had nothing to do with my career. Well, it did, but not like that.

God, it was all such a mess.

We arrived at the factory, which was looking even more glossy and polished than before.

"This place is really coming up in the world," Jax remarked, and I nodded.

"Yeah," I replied. *Hope we get to stay a part of that.*

We made our way down to the meeting room, where Ian was waiting for us—just Ian, none of the others. Was that a good sign or a bad one? I was questioning every little thing that happened here, even though I knew I should have let the stress ease a little now. I couldn't let him see how panicked I was. It was too dangerous. He might read into it and start thinking too hard about what was going on between us.

"Good to see you," Ian greeted us both as we took our seats opposite him at the table. "Thanks for coming in this morning. I know it's early, but I wanted to run through everything you've shared with us from the Greece trip. Seems like we've got a lot to go over."

"Right, of course," Jax replied, stepping in where I felt my voice had caught at the back of my throat.

"Obviously, I think we need to start with the advertising possibilities," Ian began. "Looking at what you've shared with us from your meetings, it

seems like the best approach would be a more classic ad campaign.”

This I could handle. We talked about everything we had covered with the group back in Greece, their brand and marketing and how they connected with their would-be buyers. It was a slightly different approach to the one we were used to here, but it wouldn't be difficult to tailor everything we had to create a campaign that would be fitting for what they needed. A challenge, sure, especially making sure we got the right translators to make sure everything connected with the Greek audience, but their approach to athletics and activewear seemed enthusiastic, maybe even more so than it was over here.

“I think the best way to go about it is to focus on the function of the shoes,” Jax told Ian as he pulled up some of the notes he'd taken on his phone. “Looks like they go for function over form out there.”

“Makes sense to me,” Ian agreed, and he cast his eye over in my direction. “What about you, Morgan? You feel the same way?”

“Yeah, for sure,” I agreed quickly, hoping he couldn't see that my mind was somewhere else right now. “I think they're more interested in what they can use it for as opposed to styling it. If we take that approach, we're going to have more success, I'm sure of it.”

“Sounds like the two of you got a lot for us to work with out there,” he remarked, looking between the two of us. I could see something else on his face, too, some other question on the tip of his tongue.

I tensed. I didn't know why, but I was sure this was it.

“Speaking of,” he continued. “I wanted to know if the two of you had the chance to look over our fraternization policy.”

Cold fear hit me square in the chest. This was it. It was happening.

“What do you mean?” Jax asked carefully, not giving anything away.

“It's on the contracts you signed,” he replied, his voice dropping slightly, almost warning us. I didn't dare look at Jax, for fear there would be something in my glance that gave this all away.

“Yes, of course,” Jax replied. “I'm just curious as to why you're bringing it up now.”

Ian sighed. He had clearly hoped we were just going to come clean with him right then and there. Maybe it would have been easier if we did. But I couldn't have said anything even if I wanted to. My voice stuck in my throat. Nothing was coming out.

“Because we have reason to believe the two of you might have been...

pushing the boundaries of it, so to speak,” he explained.

“In what way?” I managed to get out finally.

“Look, I’m just going to ask this outright, and I hope you’ll give me the same kind of answer,” he told us, clasping his hands on the table in front of him, looking between us like he was doing his best to read into what was really happening here.

“Are the two of you a couple?”

I clenched my hand beneath the table, and I could tell Jax wanted to reach out and touch me, comfort me, but we couldn’t give anything away right now. What the hell was I supposed to say to that?

Some part of me wanted to just own it. Look him in the eyes and tell him yes, we were a couple, and nothing was going to change that. We were together, we liked each other, we had a history, and we wanted to pick up right where we had left off to make sure we didn’t waste any more time than we had.

Because I was proud of us. Proud of us for finding our way back to each other, for getting over the bullshit that had been between us and pushing it aside and seeing each other for what we really were again. I didn’t want anything to get in the way of it. I didn’t want anything to close off the door the two of us had just opened. I wanted to be his partner again, us against the world, just like it had been. The strength I felt when he was by my side was like nothing else.

But what if it cost me this job? And this job was the door to so many other things, the door to so much that I’d wanted for so long. If they decided to punish us, I was sure I would get the rougher end of it, being the woman. We always did, no matter what had actually happened, no matter the reality of the situation. I could have been the most chaste, pure girl in the world, and they’d have still found a way to turn it around on to me.

And let’s be real. I hadn’t exactly been chaste or pure, either. Pretty far from it, as a matter of fact.

But what if I might be on the brink of throwing away everything, all the work I had done, the reputation I had made for myself? It was why I had ended the relationship in the first place, back in college, because I didn’t want him to hold me back. Because I knew I would resent him if he got in the way of the career I wanted so badly.

And now? Was it the same way? Would I stand up and acknowledge us, acknowledge this, even if it cost me this job? I didn’t know. I wasn’t sure if I

could. I wished we could have talked about this before we walked in, just cleared up what our plans were so we could present a united front against whatever was going on here. It might not have been easy, but at least we'd have been prepared for this, instead of leaving me floundering as I stared back at Ian and tried to think of the right thing to say.

I knew what the answer had to be if we were going to hang onto this contract, if we were going to make sure we didn't turn all our hard work to nothing right there on the spot. Yes, it might not have been what I wanted—it definitely wasn't how I'd planned to spend our first day as a real couple again—but sometimes, you just had to play the cards that were dealt to you and figure it out later.

I looked Ian in the eye and shook my head.

“No.”

CHAPTER 51



JAX

She let out a long sigh as soon as we were out of the building, planting a hand to her chest as though she was beyond relieved.

But as I looked over at her, there was only one thing on my mind, one thing I wanted to ask, one thing I needed to find out.

And that was just how much she had meant what she'd said in there today.

She glanced over at me as we began to walk away from the KICKS factory, having made it through the meeting without getting our contracts dissolved. I knew she would take it as a win, no matter how much seemed to be hanging over our heads right now. No matter how many more questions I had for her about what the hell we were going to do next.

"Thank God," she breathed as she leaned up against a wall just next to my car. "I think we got away with it. Right? They didn't suspect anything, did they?"

"They suspected plenty," I pointed out. "You just told them there was nothing for them to worry about. Whether or not they actually believed it is another thing entirely."

She pulled a face but nodded. She knew I was right. We couldn't guarantee they would have dropped everything, but we could hope, at least.

"Yeah, I know," she replied. "But if they believe what I told them?"

"About us not being a couple?"

She nodded.

"I'm more interested to know if you believe that," I said, cocking an eyebrow at her.

She parted her lips in surprise. Surely, it couldn't come as that much of a

shock to her. She must have known how much I wanted her, how much I wanted us to be together. How happy I had been when she had agreed to give things a shot back in America. Hearing her deny our relationship, it had thrown me more than I cared to admit.

“Do you?” I asked her, pressing for an answer. I had to know. I had to know if we were really this much of a throwaway for her. If she was willing to pretend she didn’t feel this tension between us, this desire, this chemistry. I thought, when we were in Greece, we could just get to the good part and admit how much we wanted each other, but hearing the ease with which she had tried to shut it down in front of them had me thinking twice about it.

“I think we should be willing to lighten up on things a little, just until the contract is finished,” she replied, trying to keep her voice steady. But even as she spoke, I could hear the doubt in her tone, as though she wanted to take it all back before it could escape her lips.

“You really think that,” I repeated after her, incredulous, raising my eyebrows.

She averted her gaze from mine. “Just so we don’t get into any trouble,” she protested weakly, but I could see that little smile on her face, a dead giveaway she was actually thinking something else entirely.

“And since when have you given a damn about trouble?” I reminded her, lowering my voice and planting a hand on the wall next to her. I knew we weren’t that far from the KICKS offices, and I should have shown a little more restraint when it came to flirting with her so openly, but hell, I wasn’t going to pretend for an instant I didn’t feel this raw connection with her. I needed her, and I wasn’t willing to play nice and pretend I didn’t for the sake of the KICKS reps.

“Jax,” she protested, but as soon as her eyes locked with mine, I could see her giving in. I could see her shifting herself toward me, just slightly, closing the gap between us as though she couldn’t imagine anything better right now.

I slid my hand down her arm and took her hand, guiding her toward the car.

“I get a say in this too, remember,” I murmured to her. “And I’m not willing to give you up. Not when we’re going to be working together. You really think we’re going to be able to ignore this tension? You really think we can pull that off?”

I heard her breath catch in her throat. She might have pretended to have outgrown it, but I knew she liked it when I was possessive, when I showed

her how badly I wanted her and how far I was willing to go to make sure she was mine the way I wanted her to be.

“We can keep it out of that facility, but I’m not going to pretend I don’t feel what I feel,” I continued as I led her toward my car. I was going to take her back to my place. I could already tell she wanted to be alone with me, and I had every intention of making that happen. I loved the look on her face when she was trying to deny her desire for me, her cheeks flushed, her eyes softer than before.

“They’re not going to keep me from being with you, Morgan,” I explained as I opened the car door for her. I let my hand move to the small of her back, sliding down over her ass and groping her beneath her skirt.

“Jax,” she murmured, but it came out more as a moan than anything else.

I grinned. “You think a colleague would touch you like that?” I asked her.

She moved back a little, pressing herself against me, clearly enjoying the pressure of my hand against her, enjoying the way I touched her like she belonged to me. Because, as far as I was concerned, she did. She was mine, she always would be, and some little denial in that meeting wasn’t going to change that, not for a second.

She climbed into the car, and I made my way to the driver’s side, feeling her eyes on me the whole time. I couldn’t wipe the grin off my face. I knew I had gotten her just where I wanted her, and I knew exactly what she was going to ask before I slipped in beside her.

“Take me back to your place,” she asked me, biting her lip as she looked over at me. God, it was difficult not to lean over and kiss her right then and there, pull her onto my lap and fuck her right in the car, but I knew it would have been way too much of a risk.

Besides, getting her back to my place would mean I could keep her there all day, and I had every intention of spending at least a whole afternoon in bed with her.

I drove with my hand on her thigh, gripping onto her leg tight. I loved the feeling of her muscles tensing beneath my touch, as though it took every bit of control she had not to pounce on me right then and there. I almost wanted to tell her to just go for it, make the move she so clearly wanted to make, but it would have been way too dangerous. Here, at least. We needed to put some distance between ourselves and the people we had to keep this quiet from.

I wasn’t going to push her any more than I already had, though I would have been lying if I said there wasn’t something exciting in knowing we were

getting away with something right underneath their noses. Leaving that meeting where she had denied us being together at all and then going back to my place to pick up where we had left off in Greece.

I stole glances at her out of the corner of my eye. Neither of us said anything. I could hear her breathing quicken as she started to grow more desirous, and I put my foot down, pushing the car forward so I could get us to our destination as soon as possible.

I wanted her so badly it made everything else just vanish from my mind. I couldn't focus on anything sensible, on how much safer it would have been to just go along with what she'd said and close off this relationship until we were done with the contract at KICKS. We were probably putting ourselves and our careers in danger for this, all because we weren't able to keep our hands off of each other. But at the same time, it made it even damn hotter to me to know there was this burning want between us, strong enough that we were willing to overlook our better senses to indulge it. I loved that. Loved knowing how badly she wanted me.

Loved knowing that she felt exactly as I did about the way this was headed.

We pulled up outside my place, and I made my way to her car door again, taking my time, wanting to push her to that point of no return when it came to the anticipation of what was about to come. I offered her my hand, playing the gentleman, even though I had every intention to be anything *but* the moment we got inside my apartment. Just the brush of her fingers against my palm was enough to ignite me, and I swallowed heavily to try and push down the need in my body.

She couldn't take her eyes off me as we made our way into my place. I could feel that gaze burning into me, practically boring a hole in my head. She might have been willing to deny it before, but now that we were alone together, there was no way in hell she could come close to denying it.

We made it to my apartment—just—before she grabbed me and pulled me in for a passionate kiss. As soon as our lips met, I grinned. I knew she wanted this as badly as I did, and neither of us could deny it, even though it probably would have been in our best interests to pretend we weren't as hungry for each other as we really were. How could I begin to try and pretend I didn't want her? My whole life, I had been waiting for someone to make me feel the way she did, but nothing came close.

I pushed her back against the door, enmeshing my hands in her hair as I

kissed her, our tongues coming together with the starved need of people who didn't know how the hell they were going to find a way to keep this quiet. She arched her back to press herself against me, her lips parting as she moaned against my mouth.

It was hard to believe just an hour or so ago, she had been denying there was anything at all going on between us. Right now, I knew she would have done anything she could to have me, to keep me here and make sure I didn't slip through her fingers. Maybe she couldn't tell them what was really happening here, but she could at least show me how much she still wanted me, even if she'd had to keep it quiet for our careers.

"I need you to take me to bed," she breathed in my ear.

Fuck, I loved hearing her talk to me like that, hearing her tell me how badly she needed me and how she would have done anything to make me hers, to give her body over to me, even just for the day. Yes, there was a world waiting outside for us, a world that probably wouldn't look too kindly on what we were doing here, but right now, right here, it was just us, and there was nothing more important to me than getting her into that bedroom and forgetting about everything else.

CHAPTER 52



MORGAN

He tossed me down onto the bed, and I pulled him on top of me, tugging at his shirt and tossing it aside hurriedly. I didn't have time to wait. That car ride alone had been something close to torture, and I couldn't bear the thought of holding off any longer to take what I wanted so badly from him.

The way he had grabbed my ass outside the car had turned me on so much, it had been hard to think straight. As though he was making sure I remembered just who was in charge here, just how much he wanted me, and just what he would do to make sure he didn't lose me. I loved it when he took control like that, at least when it came to our sex life. Out in the real world, I might have put up more of a fight, but seeing that look in his eyes and hearing the want in his voice made everything else drop from my mind.

He kissed me hard, his tongue pushing into my mouth as he practically tore my clothes off and tossed them to the floor beside him. He didn't give a damn what it took to get me naked. He just knew he wanted me ready for him—ready to fuck, ready to give him everything he needed.

“God, you look so fucking hot,” he groaned against my lips once he'd stripped me down. He pulled off his pants and underwear, kicking them off so I could feel the hardness of his cock against my thigh. I moaned against him, telling him in the only way I could think how much I wanted him right now, how nothing was going to come close until I felt him inside me.

Suddenly, he pulled back, flipping me over so I was facing away from him, lying on my stomach. He landed a playful spank on my ass, and I giggled as I looked over my shoulder at him.

“Is that for saying we weren't a couple?” I asked him, wiggling my ass playfully in his direction.

“No,” he replied, leaning down to sink his teeth lightly into my butt cheek. I squealed, but the pain was nothing compared to the pleasure of his hands all over me.

“That’s because your ass looks too damn spankable,” he said, and he grabbed my hips and pulled me up toward him so I was on all fours. I needed him inside me, right the fuck now. He wasn’t usually this intense when it came to our bedroom activities, but I had to admit, there was something seriously hot to me about him taking what he wanted like this. Especially when it just so happened to align with exactly what I needed.

He guided himself against my pussy. I could feel the thickness of his cock nudging me open, and then pushed all the way inside me. I closed my eyes, pushing myself up on all fours so I could really grind into him. The fullness from this angle was intense, almost more than I could take, but I didn’t want it to end, not for an instant. I loved the feel of him fucking me like this, filling me from behind, and he knew it.

He moved in deep, fast strokes, the sound of our bodies coming together and our frantic panting the only noises in the room. Pushing one hand between my legs, he began to play with my clit as he fucked me.

I groaned loudly, the intensity of the pleasure building fast inside of me. I could hear him moaning behind me, and fuck, I loved it so much when he got vocal, like he couldn’t hold back with just how good it felt to be inside me. I knew he had wanted this from the second we had stepped out of the KICKS facility, and giving it to him like this, letting him take control and take me just how he wanted, already had me drawing in close to an orgasm.

I pushed back against him, grinding myself into him, taking as much of him as I could with every thrust. I was greedy for his cock right now, practically starving for it. I felt like I couldn’t get enough of him, but at the same time, the pleasure was almost too much for me to take—a delicious contradiction that had my mind turning to mush with the sheer pleasure of it all.

He massaged my clit as he moved inside me, driving himself deep and hard into my pussy and slipping his other hand along my back to grasp my hair. He pushed his hand against my scalp, wrapping my hair around his fingers just enough to apply the perfect amount of tension. It felt like he was stimulating every part of me at once, my body completely given over to the way he made me feel, unable to do anything but give in to how perfect it was.

The orgasm was building deep in my belly, the heat of it, the need of it

growing until I couldn't think about anything else but going over the edge and into that release I craved so fucking badly. I was moaning with every breath now as he pushed into me, deeper, deeper, his fingers brushing against my clit, the mesh of sensations making my whole body start to tense and drive toward that climax I needed so badly. After all the tension and all the worry lately, it felt like this was the least I deserved, a chance to forget it all and leave it all behind for a moment, for as long as it took for him to take me where I needed to go.

“Fuck!” I cried out as the orgasm finally hit me, my pussy contracting around his hard cock.

He drove himself into me and held himself there, tugging lightly on my hair to guide me all the way back against him so I could feel every part of him inside of me as I finished.

I slumped forward onto the bed, my arms trembling beneath me and giving out at last. A few seconds later, I felt him reach his own release inside me, groaning loudly as he went over the edge. I looked behind me so I could take in his face as he came, and the sheer pleasure written all over his features told me everything I needed to know. He wanted me, still wanted me, just as much as he ever had. Maybe even more, now that we were trying to go low key.

Slowly, he pulled back from me, and I flipped onto my back as he fell onto the bed beside me.

“Holy fucking shit, Morgan,” he murmured. He breathed deep, inhaling slowly like he was trying to remind himself he was still alive.

“I know.” I giggled. I felt as though I was floating, the pleasure still tingling in my scalp and the tips of my fingers. I wasn't sure what it was about the two of us being together, but there was something about it I just couldn't deny. Something about it I never would have wanted to, even if I could.

I loved being with him, especially when he took control the way he had. He knew just how to please me, and being with him lit every part of me on fire. It wasn't just about my body, it was my mind, too. My mind filled with the certainty that he needed me in every way he could have me. I loved that.

We both just lay there for a moment, trying to come back down, both of us still panting from the intense fuck we'd just shared. I knew we needed to talk about what had happened in that meeting—and what we were going to do now that we were out of it—but I couldn't form words quite yet. They

seemed out of my reach.

Finally, I turned to him and laid a hand over his chest. There was so much I wanted to say to him, I didn't even know where I was meant to start. Really, I wanted to tell him how sorry I was that I had denied our involvement. I could tell from the way he had reacted that it had stung him deeply, and that had never been my intention. It never would be, not when it came to him. I wanted to do what was right for us, and I intended to do everything I could to keep that promise, to myself and to him.

"You know, what I said in the meeting back there," I told him softly, trying to find the right tone. "It was because I wanted to protect us. What we have, I mean."

"I know," he murmured, and he reached over to hook a strand of hair back behind my ear. It was crazy to me, how he could go from being so raw and passionate and intense to so sweet and tender in a matter of moments. But that was him. It had always been him, these two sides he didn't let anyone else see. I knew I was the only one, and I valued that deeply.

"I don't want to end things between us. You know I don't," I continued. "But we have to be careful."

Even as I spoke, I wasn't sure I wanted to believe it. Why did it matter who knew about us? When I felt as deeply for him as I did, did it even matter? Surely, the most important thing was that we had found each other again, after so long, after so many years, and our spark was as fiery as it had been back then.

The KICKS factory, the reps, all of it, seemed so distant right now as I lay there in his bed next to him. I knew I should have been thinking about it, keeping it in my focus, but how could I when we were together and I didn't care who knew about it? I would have done anything to keep it that way, anything to make sure I didn't lose him.

"But I don't care about it right now," I confessed before I leaned over and buried my face into his chest. "I'm just happy we're here. Together."

He smoothed his hand over my hair, and I inhaled deeply, breathing in the scent of him. It was comforting to me, that smell, a reminder of how close we were, how well I knew him. I wasn't sure I had ever let anyone get as close to me as Jax was, and normally, that would have freaked me out, but I knew I was safe with him. I knew there was nothing I couldn't say to him, nothing I couldn't tell him.

"We're okay," he murmured, rubbing his hand down my back. "And

don't worry. I'm not going to blow anything for us. I know how much this means to you."

"Thank you," I mumbled against his chest, smiling into his skin and breathing him in again. "But can we talk about that later? I just want to be here with you. Right now."

"Sure thing," he replied, and I could hear the grin in his voice. I let out a long breath and promised myself I would start thinking about how we were going to handle this soon. But for now, the only thing I cared about was lying here next to him and feeling the slow in and out of his breath beneath my face. The rest of the world, at least for now, could wait for us.

CHAPTER 53



JAX

“Come on, asshole, I’m ready to kick your ass!” Max exclaimed to me, that big-ass cocky grin on his face telling me everything I needed to know about what he thought he was going to do.

“Yeah, good luck with that,” I fired back, raising my eyebrows. “You really think I’m going to make it that easy for you?”

“I think you always do,” he replied, slapping me on the shoulder as I clipped on the vest we were using for this paintball game.

It had been way too long since we’d had a chance to just goof off, blow off some steam, and have some fun together. When the guys had suggested I come out for a paintballing session, I had jumped at the chance, looking for any opportunity to put the stress of the KICKS situation to the back of my mind and chill out for a little while. I had invited Morgan to join us, but she had turned me down. She told me she couldn’t think of anything worse than being chased around an arena while she tried to keep herself from getting taken out by a bunch of guys with paintball guns.

We had come to this place a couple of times before, and it was always fun. Just outside the city, they had an acre or so of forest set up for us to run through, with a few bunkers that we could hide out in to try and keep ourselves safe against the barrage of chaos that usually rained down on our heads. Not that the reprieve lasted for long, but hey, I would take what I could get.

Derrick and Seb were on my team, while Max had Graham and Spencer on the other. A couple of teenagers were playing at the same time as us, and I had overheard one making a snarky comment or two about us.

“That little asshole,” Max had muttered to me, shaking his head. “He

doesn't know what he's in for."

"Max, play nice." I laughed. "He's just a kid."

"So he needs to be reminded that he can't just say whatever he wants, right?" he replied, raising his eyebrows in amusement. "It's important we put him in his place."

I knew there was going to be no talking him out of it, and besides, our hour out there was just beginning. The owner called for us to head into the forest arena, and I dived in to search out a bunker I could camp out in for a while as I got my bearings. Seb and Derrick did the same, the three of us spreading out so we could take out as many of them as we could before they had a chance to work out where exactly we were.

My heart was pumping, but it wasn't the same stress I felt at work. This was chill, a chance to burn off some energy without letting my head get in the way of it. I loaded up my gun, made sure it was ready to fire, and hid down behind the bunker, peering through the sights until a hapless victim wandered into my line of vision.

Max was first. He darted out from behind a tree, trying to keep his head down, but I managed to get a shot off. It exploded just next to him, on the bark of a tree beside him, giving away my position. Shit!

I ducked down again, waiting for him to look away, and I heard a cry of irritation. When I lifted my head once more, I saw Max had taken a shot at one of the teenagers who had been talking shit about us. I rolled my eyes, laughing. He never could just let something go, even though it would have been sensible not to let this little asshole get to us.

The kid had keeled over like he had taken an actual bullet, and I shook my head. Shit, I felt sorry for him. He had just come out here to have fun. He hadn't expected to have to deal with my asshole of a brother, had he?

I headed out from behind the bunker to get him up on his feet again, but before I could, I heard the pop of a shot being launched in my direction. I didn't have time to get out of the way before I felt it strike me, right between the legs.

"Shit!" I cried out, and the pain took me to my knees. I heard one of the other teenagers laughing, and I cursed myself for not being a little more brutal.

Okay, that was it for me. I needed to ice myself before something unfortunate started to swell. I made my way back to the main office building and delved into the first-aid box for some cooling packs, hoping Seb and

Derrick weren't going to miss me too much.

It didn't take long for Max and the others to get ahead, and soon, Derrick had come back to find me and tell me off for leaving them to handle it all on their own.

"We got our asses handed to us, man!" he exclaimed, once he found me again. "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that I don't want my balls to swell up," I replied, gesturing to the ice pack against my groin. "That alright with you?"

"Yeah, I guess I can give you an honorable discharge for that," he said, laughing.

I winced. "No talk about discharge when we're dealing with that part of my body," I protested.

"Apologies, apologies," he replied, holding his hands up. "You need anything to save your manhood?"

"I think I'm going to be fine," I assured him, pulling the ice pack away and grabbing a new one. "Sorry to leave you guys out there in the lurch."

"I think I can give you a pass, given the circumstances," he replied, leaning up in the doorway. He paused for a moment as though pondering something.

"Your girlfriend not going to be pissed you got yourself injured?" he wondered aloud. I knew this was his way of trying to shift the conversation to what was going on with Morgan. Had the other guys put him up to it? Maybe. They probably wanted to make sure I wasn't going to cause them too many problems with getting involved with her, now that they knew I was well and truly back with her again.

"Just annoyed she didn't get the shot off herself," I joked.

He grinned. "So the two of you are really together now, huh?"

"On the down-low," I replied. "As long as we're working with KICKS. But the contract isn't going to last forever."

"Have you thought about what's going to happen when it does end?" he asked me.

I frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"When it's over," he explained. "What are the two of you going to do after that?"

"You think she might leave?" I asked him. It hadn't even crossed my mind, not with how well things had been going, but I guessed he might have a point.

“No, I mean with work,” he replied. “You think she’s good at what she does, right?”

“I know she is,” I replied, grinning. I was so freaking proud of everything she had done and how hard she had worked to get where she was. Not many people would have been willing to put the effort in she did, but she never looked for excuses—she just got it done.

“So what about inviting her to come work with us when you’re done?” he suggested. “If she’s got your stamp of approval, I know she must be good. And we could always use someone new on board, someone who knows what she’s doing.”

I stared at him for a moment. I hadn’t even considered that possibility when we had first started working together. She had her firm, I had mine. Hell, we had been fighting against each other for a while there. But maybe he had a point. Maybe she would do well working with us.

And it would mean I could have her around more, too. Bringing her in would make the company even stronger, I was sure of it. She was seriously dedicated, but she hadn’t found her break into a major brand yet, and this could be the way to open that door for her. I wasn’t sure if she would accept it, if she would think it was a good idea to take on a job like this one when she had worked so hard to get where she was on her own terms so far, but hell, there wouldn’t be any harm in suggesting it to her, right?

“You’d be alright with that?” I asked him. “You and the guys, I mean. Having someone around who I’m involved with? You don’t think that would cause issues?”

“If she’s good at her job, I don’t see why not,” he replied with a shrug. “We could always use someone else who knows what they’re doing, and I wouldn’t want to pass up the chance to bring on someone else if they can take things to the next level. She’s good enough to get this contract. That means she has some serious chops.”

I nodded, pressing the ice pack against me as I considered it. When this contract with KICKS was over, we’d both have to think about what we were going to do next, and I didn’t see why I couldn’t at least offer her a position with us. She could turn it down if she thought it was too much to take on, but I knew we worked well together. We bounced off each other with ease, as though we had been made to work together, and I was sure we could bring that to the business, too.

Soon, the other guys appeared after the game, teasing each other loudly

about the loss that had just landed on them.

“Hey, if Jax hadn’t flaked out on us, we would have been fine,” Seb grumbled.

“Sorry,” I apologized, grinning. “I’ll get you guys a beer to make up for it, okay?”

“Yeah, that’s the least you can do,” he replied.

“Once I’ve recovered from my injury,” I told him, gesturing down to the ice pack I was still holding against my crown jewels. I hoped the hit hadn’t left any marks. I didn’t much feel like explaining to Morgan what had happened. I knew she would laugh her ass off at me. Actually, now that I thought about it, maybe this hit was worth it if it meant I could put a smile on her face. At the end of the day, that was all I really cared about doing. As long as I could make her giggle, I was down to put up with pretty much anything.

After cleaning up and changing clothes, we headed back to our cars to make our way to the bar for a few drinks, and I knew I was going to need them to get over the humiliation of getting hit by those teenagers. I knew they had been aiming for that part of me specifically, those little assholes. I should have let Max take them out. That was the last time I was ever going to try and do anything nice for teenage boys. That much, I was sure about.

I rolled down the window to let the cool air rush in while I drove, and I considered what Derrick had suggested to me. It might have been a long shot, but honestly, I liked the idea of working with her, of getting to spend even more time together. I didn’t know if she was going to warm to it, but hey, all I could do was ask, right?

I drummed out a beat on the steering wheel and grinned as we headed back to the city.

CHAPTER 54



MORGAN

There was an insistent knocking at my door, and I knew before I even opened it who was going to be waiting for me on the other side. Sure enough, when I threw it open, Haley was standing there with a massive grin on her face.

“Get your stuff together,” she ordered. “And wear something comfy. I have something planned for us.”

I raised my eyebrows at her.

“Oh, do you, now?” I asked. It was the weekend, and I had been hoping to recoup some of the sleep I had lost while we had been traveling back from Greece, but I wasn’t sure if she was going to give me the time.

“Yeah, and you’re going to love it,” she told me. “Come on. Let’s get out of here!”

I changed into some jeans and a baggy old tee, and we caught the subway across the city while she filled me in excitedly about where we were actually headed.

“It’s called a smash room,” she explained to me. “I was looking up ways I could blow off steam. You know, with all the decorating and everything, I was starting to get a little stir crazy in my apartment, so I wanted to do something fun for a while, just forget about it for a bit.”

“A smash room?” I repeated after her, making sure I’d heard it right.

“Yeah, you go there, and they give you these big hammers and sticks and stuff, and you can just smash up this old furniture and other crap they pick up from dumpsters to destroy,” she told me. “Doesn’t that sound fun?”

I laughed. It might not have been how I expected or intended to spend my weekend, but it actually sounded like a good time to me.

We arrived outside the building that contained this smash room a few minutes before our appointment, and the woman who ran the place gave us eye protection, helmets, and gloves so we didn't get caught by any flying shards. I gripped the baseball bat she had given me, testing the weight of it in my hands. I could already feel the excitement rising in me. This might be just what I needed to put the last few days of stress behind me—the worry about KICKS finding out what was going on between me and Jax, the fear we were on the brink of being exposed and the questions as to what was going to happen when and if we were.

“This way, ladies,” the woman told us, pushing open a door so we could enter. On the other side were stacks of old, beat-up objects—chairs, burned-out TVs, couches, everything—and I surveyed them, trying to work out where I wanted to start.

“Hell yeah!” Haley exclaimed as she lifted up her bat and brought it down on one of the chairs. The crack as it smashed into the wood made me jump, but the sight of it crumbling beneath her attack was so damn satisfying. I took a swing at one of the legs and watched as it crumpled out underneath my strength. Okay, yeah, that was fun. Maybe more fun than it should have been.

“How long do we have in here?” I asked, catching my breath slightly. I wasn't in the greatest shape of my life, and I didn't want to let her see that.

“An hour,” she replied, leaning on the bat and surveying everything in front of us. “Come on. Let's do this!”

We left nothing standing in that room by the time we were done—smashing in the TV sets, bashing up the couches, breaking down the chairs until they were basically nothing more than a pile of splinters. Even though I was sweating like crazy the entire time, there was something really cathartic about just being able to let loose like this, not caring what I did or what damage I left behind. I hadn't even realized how much tension I'd been holding until I started to swing, but by the time the hour was up, I felt as though I had managed to leave some of it there in the room.

“See?” Haley told me as she caught her breath. “I told you it'd be fun!”

“Yeah, it really was,” I replied as we made our way out of the room and pulled off our helmets and gloves, handing back our weapons to the woman who ran the place. She stashed them away once more, and I cast a longing look at my baseball bat. Not that I would ever have done anything with it out in the real world, of course, but just having that thing to swing around would have made me feel a whole lot more confident. Nobody would fuck with me

if I was just casually strolling around with it in my hand, right?

“I’m starving,” Haley told me. “You want to get something to eat? I saw there’s an Italian place right next to here.”

“Yeah, I need pizza,” I agreed, my stomach rumbling at the thought. I hadn’t realized how much of an appetite I had built up until that moment, but right now, all I could think about was chowing down on more pizza than I ever had before in my life.

We headed to the Italian place and took our seats at a small booth tucked away in the corner. The fresh bread came out and the waiter put some water on our table before us. Haley tore off a chunk of the bread and popped it in her mouth, then hit me with a question.

“So,” she said, tilting her head toward me with interest. “How are things going with you and Jax?”

“I think they’re going well,” I replied, and I felt a little smile creep up my face as I remembered our last hookup. God, it had been so freaking hot, I hadn’t been able to get it out of my head ever since. I wasn’t sure how he was capable of making me feel the way he was, but he still desired me just as much as he ever did, and the thrill of knowing that was everything to me. I liked it when he got a little possessive, making sure I knew how much he wanted this, and I wouldn’t have changed it for the world.

“You guys are, like actually together now?” she asked me, and I nodded.

“I think so,” I replied. “We talked about it while we were away together, and both of us are willing to give it a shot. I know it’s a long time since we last did it, but it feels right, you know? Like this is where we’re meant to be.”

“That’s super cute,” she told me, then beamed as she listened to me fill her in on everything that had been happening between us.

I smiled, feeling a little flush to my cheeks. “Yeah, I’m really happy with him,” I admitted. “I didn’t think this was where we were going to end up, you know, when we saw each other again, but it feels right that we did.”

“And how do the people you’re working for feel about it?” she asked.

I winced. “Uh, they don’t know,” I replied. “And I’m going to keep it that way if I can. I don’t want them to find out if I can help it. I know they wouldn’t be too happy about it.”

“Shit, that’s stressful,” she muttered. “How do you manage it? Him and the job, I mean?”

“He’s working the same job as me, so it’s not that difficult to find time for him right now,” I replied. “We spend all of our time together working

anyway, so it's not like we don't see enough of each other."

"But this is just a short-term contract, right?" she asked. "So you're not going to have that forever."

"I know," I sighed. "I'm not sure how we're going to keep finding the time to... you know. Do what we're doing when it's over."

"Yeah, you work your ass off all the time," she replied. "I have a hard enough time getting hold of you. I'm not sure how you're going to handle actually dating someone. I don't think you've actually dated anyone seriously in the whole time I've known you, I'm not sure I could wrap my head around you having an actual boyfriend."

As she talked, I pondered the issue. She had a point. It was going to be hard for me to find the time to be with someone else, especially with how hard I pushed myself at work. Right now, it was easy because we were focused on the same end goal, working together so closely there was hardly room for anything else to get in. But what if that changed in the future? What if something happened to shift that? When both of us returned to our normal lives, we would be distracted, busy with everything that needed to be taken care of. What if our newfound relationship fell by the wayside as a result?

It was why I had ended things with him in the first place because I wasn't sure I could balance the career I wanted with being in a relationship with him. Had that really changed? Had those issues only gotten more intense in the time we'd been apart, since I had dedicated myself completely to my career? I wasn't willing to throw all of that hard work away, and I was sure he didn't want to, either. But how would we find time for each other, for the start of this blooming new romance, in between our demanding careers?

When Haley got up to head to the bathroom, I leaned back from the table and pulled out my phone to take a look at my calendar for the next few months. Of course, the following weeks were assigned to this KICKS project, and when I looked at that space in my calendar, I knew it was time I was going to be able to spend with Jax. Time we could hang out together without feeling guilty about falling behind on our work, on what needed to be done, on everything we had to take care of.

But after that? After that, I wasn't so sure. I had a solid two months in the aftermath of the contract where Susan had already signed me up to go out to another few conferences, so I'd be out of the city a lot. I wasn't sure how much time we would be able to spend together in between those trips away, and the thought of being so far from him just after we had gotten back

together tugged on my heart.

I was so enjoying this first flush of our new relationship, all the passion and excitement and fun that came with it, but my job might get right in the way of it. What if I couldn't make the time for him? What if there was too much space between us, and he decided it wasn't worth trying to stick it out after everything we had been through? I had been the one to end things before, but he might close the door this time, if he decided he didn't want to be hanging on and waiting for me to come back to the city to see him.

"You okay?"

My head snapped up, and I realized I had been staring off into space. I smiled up at her and nodded quickly. I didn't want her worrying about me. She had invited me out today because she wanted to have fun, not because she wanted to deal with my neuroses after my newfound relationship with Jax.

"Yeah, fine," I replied, and I tucked my phone back into my pocket, trying not to think too hard about what the next few months might bring.

CHAPTER 55



JAX

As I checked on the food bubbling away on the stove, my phone buzzed. I grinned as I looked down at the message I had just received. It was from Morgan, and she was replying to my earlier text inviting her to come over to my place so we could have dinner together.

“Sure,” she had told me. “But I get to pick the movie. Deal?”

I texted her back to agree right away, and pulled out the bottle of wine I had picked out for the evening. I hadn’t actually confirmed with her until now, but I had missed her since I had last seen her a couple of days ago, and I was looking forward to getting to spend some time with her, pass a little longer with her at my place, wrapped up in my arms.

I had been thinking about her all day, about how good it had been to have her sleep over the other night after the two of us had hooked up post-KICKS meeting. It was crazy how much I wanted her here again, even though it had been just a matter of days since I’d last seen her. There was something about her presence that made everything feel as though it made a little more sense, and I didn’t want to give up on that for the world.

I loved spending time with her, and there was so much time for us to catch up on, so much time lost since we had been together last. She was the only person I really enjoyed spending so much time around. Everyone else, I would find myself getting bored, restless, wanting to take my alone-time back, but with her, it was different. It always had been. She just made everything make sense, and I wouldn’t have missed out on a chance to see her for the world.

She arrived a half hour or so later, with her laptop under one arm and a bottle of wine in the other.

“I already have one of those,” I told her, nodding to the wine.

“Better to have too much than too little,” she replied, and she leaned up to kiss me on the cheek. It all felt so comfortable, as though this was what I had been waiting for from the start, from the moment I had laid eyes on her again. This easy domesticity, where she kissed me on the cheek as though there had never been a time she hadn’t greeted me like that.

“What are you making?” she asked me as she wandered through to the kitchen to check on what I was cooking up.

“Just some beef stew,” I replied. “I’m making the broth now. You want to help chopping the vegetables?”

“Hey, I’m meant to be the guest,” she teased with a playful pout. “That means I don’t have to do anything, right?”

“Yeah, but if you help, we can get to your movie sooner,” I pointed out. She paused for a moment, pondering, and then nodded.

“You’ve got a deal,” she replied. “What do you need help with?”

I pointed her in the direction of the vegetables that needed chopping as I seasoned the sauce that would go over them. She chatted to me as she chopped, barely paying attention to what she was doing, until I glanced over and realized she was chopping them way too big.

“Hey, you need to go a little smaller than that,” I told her, and she laughed at me.

“I thought I was meant to be helping,” she protested. “Not you micro-managing me.”

“It’s just so they all cook evenly,” I replied. “I can take over, if you want.”

“No, no, don’t you worry, your majesty of the kitchen realm.” She giggled. “I can get them down to size. Look.”

She began to chop them up into tiny pieces, and I laughed as she whittled them down to barely half the size they had been before.

“Okay, okay, I take your point,” I told her, shaking my head. “I think they’re as small as they need to be. Come on, let’s get them into the stew. I’m starving.”

We put them into the pot that was filling the room with delicious savory scents, and I poured her a glass of wine as we chatted. Not about work, for a change, but about the movie she had brought over for us to watch.

“It’s just some cheesy rom-com thing,” she replied, waving a hand. “One of my friends put me onto it. She said it’s loads of fun if you can get past how

silly it is.”

“Silly sounds perfect.” I took a sip of my wine. For a brief moment, I considered bringing up what Derrick had suggested the other day, inviting her on board to the company when the contract was over, but I brushed it off for the time being. Work stuff could wait. Right now, I just wanted to enjoy our time together.

“Yeah, you always had a soft spot for rom-coms, didn’t you?” she teased me lightly. “I remember all those ones you would bring home for us to watch, the black and white ones.”

“Hey, those are classics,” I replied. “That’s different.”

“Potato, potahto,” she replied, waving her hand. “Speaking of, do you think the food’s ready yet? I’m starving.”

I served up the food along with a few generous pieces of crusty bread I’d picked up for breakfast that morning, and she set up the laptop so we could watch the movie as we ate. She flopped down on the couch next to me and lowered her head onto my shoulder for a moment. I leaned back against her, smiling, enjoying the soft pressure of her up against me like that. Even though I knew we were well and truly back together by now, there was still something shocking to me about the weight of her next to me, the way it made me feel.

We ate and sipped wine and told off the characters on the screen in front of us for making every single wrong choice they possibly could have. The film was silly, just like she’d said, but it was pretty damn entertaining, too, even though she got totally and hilariously frustrated at how foolish they were acting.

“Damn, girl, come on!” she exclaimed, as the leading lady dramatically turned to walk away from her man in the rain. It was a totally ridiculous moment, but she was clearly invested.

“He’s good for you, you idiot,” she said, shaking her head. “Why can’t you see that?”

I grinned and draped an arm along the back of the couch. I wondered if she saw something of herself in this girl. Something of the version of her who had walked away from me, all those years ago.

Jesus, that all felt like a lifetime away. How could any of it have ever been real? How could she have ever been anywhere but right here with me, right next to me, so close I felt like I could hold her here all night long? I was sure nothing else would get in the way of what we had, not now that we had

found each other again. She belonged here, and I could see it, and she could see it, and nothing else mattered.

“Hey, give her a break,” I protested, as I watched the girl tearfully storm away from her would-be lover in the rain. “If she didn’t leave him now, there would be nothing for them to argue about in the third act, would there?”

“I guess,” she replied, grinning up at me. I cupped her face in my hand, leaning down to plant a kiss against her lips, and just paused for a moment when I pulled back, gazing into her eyes, before I averted my attention back to the screen.

I still couldn’t believe she was really here. After we had first split, there had been so many nights when I would have given anything, anything at all, to have her here next to me, to be able to wrap my arms around her and hold her close like this and know nothing was going to get in the way of the rest of this night. I would have given up my career, my university spot, all of it. I would have done anything if I just got a chance to slip the ring on her finger.

I wished I could go back in time to that version of me and tell him he didn’t have a damn thing to worry about. It might take a while, but she was going to come back. She was going to come back, and things were going to be better than ever because all that distance between us had just given us both a chance to grow and become the people we always wanted to be.

The movie reached its dramatic climax, with the couple embracing in the rain.

“You ever try to kiss me when it’s raining, I’m dumping you,” Morgan told me playfully.

“Where’s your sense of romance?”

“Uh, I’m less worried about romance and more worried about my makeup running.” She laughed.

“You haven’t got a romantic bone in your body,” I muttered, but I honestly didn’t mind. I liked how straightforward she was, how she just cut to the chase and moved through the bullshit before it could take hold. It was one of the many things I had fallen in love with when we had been together back as teenagers, and it was one of the many things I was starting to fall in love with again now.

Shit. I had been trying not to think about that word, the enormity of it. How much it might have meant if I said it out loud. I wasn’t ready for that yet, not until I was sure she felt the same way, not until I was certain she could feel it the same way I could, even if it might have been too much for

her right now.

The ring I had picked out all those years ago was still in the box at the back of my drawer. I could have gotten rid of it when I had moved, but I had decided to hold on to it. Even though I knew I could never have given it to anyone other than her, I held on to it, maybe because I knew I would want it one day.

Maybe because I knew she was always going to end up back here again.

“Well, that was total crap,” she said cheerfully, once the movie was over.

“Total crap,” I agreed. “But pretty entertaining crap.”

“Yeah, well, maybe after a few glasses of wine, everything’s entertaining,” she said, raising her eyebrows at me in amusement. “The food was good though. Especially the vegetables. They were chopped to just the right size, you know what I mean?”

She joked with me as we cleared away the plates, and we talked about the film, what we would have said to the people in it if we were there for them while they were navigating that mess of a relationship. And it was peaceful, comfortable, as though this was where we both belonged. Her, in my apartment, on this cozy night, where the rain had just started to drip against the windows beside us. Like it was just us here, in the whole world, as though the whole city had emptied out to give us some privacy.

I wrapped my arms around her from behind as she did the dishes, planting a kiss on the side of her neck. She smiled and nestled back into me happily. There was so much I wanted to say to her, but right now, all I could think to do was kiss her again.

CHAPTER 56



MORGAN

I lifted my head from the pillow and looked around, trying to remember exactly where I was. Not in my own bed. I could hear a soft breathing from beside me, and then it clicked. I had slept over with Jax the night before. I grinned and stretched my arm out across his chest lazily, running my fingers over his skin.

“Hey,” he murmured, looking over at me, his eyes opening softly. It was like we were wrapped up in this little palace, a million miles from anything that mattered. Almost as though we were back in Greece again, with nothing but the warm sunshine and the soft lapping waves at the beach to think about.

“Good morning,” I replied, nuzzling into him. He drew me in close, and I was about to roll on top of him when something hit me.

“Crap!” I exclaimed loudly, and I pulled back from him at once.

“What? What is it?” he asked, concerned.

“It’s Monday, Jax,” I reminded him. “We’re meant to be at the KICKS office this morning!”

“Damn it,” he groaned, sitting up from the bed and stretching his arms over his head. “What time is it?”

“Nearly eight,” I replied, looking at my phone, which I had left next to the bed. “How long does it take to get down there?”

“Half an hour or so,” he replied. “We should have time.”

“I need to take a shower, go home and grab a new outfit,” I muttered. “I can’t just turn up in jeans.”

“You’re not going to have time for that,” he replied, shaking his head. “Let’s just get out of here, okay? They’re not going to know you’re wearing the same thing from yesterday.”

“I feel like they’ll guess,” I groaned, and he pulled me back to the bed to sit beside him.

“Hey,” he murmured. “You’re going to be fine. Okay? Don’t get yourself into a state.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I knew he was right. I had to pull myself together. If I went in all in a flustered mess, they would guess in an instant that there was something up with me, and I didn’t need to give them any more hints than I already had.

I took a quick shower, got dressed, brushed my hair, and washed my face, hoping my lack of makeup wouldn’t draw too much attention. We climbed into his car and made our way down to the KICKS offices. He drove with one hand on my leg, like he wanted me to remember how much he wanted me, as though I could ever have forgotten after what had happened last night. God, the sex had been *good*.

I pushed that to the back of my mind as we arrived at the offices and made our way down to the room they had put aside for us. Ian passed by me as I headed to grab myself a coffee from the stand at the front of the building, and he looked me up and down with a frown on his face.

“Are you alright, Morgan?”

“Fine,” I replied, smiling broadly. “Just didn’t sleep too well last night, that’s all.”

Well. It wasn’t entirely a lie. I hadn’t gotten as much sleep as I would have liked, but at least the reasons for that had been a whole lot of fun, right?

“Guess I’m still a little jetlagged,” I offered, hoping if I brought up the reminder that I had just been abroad for his company, he might drop whatever suspicions he had.

“Of course,” he agreed. “What are you two working on today?”

“Oh, I just got in. I think we’ll need to catch up and lay out our plans for the rest of the week,” I told him, playing it off as though I hadn’t spent a whole lot of time with Jax in the last twenty-four hours.

“If you need anything from us, don’t be afraid to ask,” he replied, and I nodded and held my breath as he walked off down the corridor. I always felt like I was on edge around him now, as though he might have busted me at any turn, but I knew it was just paranoia on my part. They didn’t know anything more than what we’d told them, and unless I gave them a reason to look deeper into what we had previously denied, I knew there was no way we were going to be able to blow our cover.

I headed back down to the room with Jax, and we got to work for the day. We were trying to come up with a solid campaign that would fly in the Greek markets, and I was confident we would be able to come up with something that would work, now that we had a good grasp on what the business looked like out there.

It always amazed me how well we worked together. I wasn't sure if it was our past or what was going on in our present that made it so easy, but the ideas seemed to flow. Even when I wasn't sure about something, I would just ask him, and he would be able to confirm whether I was on to something or guide me in the right direction if he thought we could have gone about it a different way. It wasn't antagonistic, like it had been when we'd first been on this project, like we were trying to outdo each other. No, it was supportive because I knew he wanted me to succeed as much as he wanted it for himself.

And when we worked together, the heights we could reach just felt unstoppable. Nothing could possibly have gotten in our way. And I could tell from the way his face lit up when I bounced ideas off of him that he was of the exact same mind I was. He knew exactly how well we were doing and exactly how far we could take this. We just needed a little more focus.

It was hard to believe we were going to be off this project in a matter of weeks. We seemed to make so much sense together, it was weird to think that we'd be returning to our respective offices soon enough. I hadn't been in touch with Susan a whole lot these last few days. She had just been letting me take care of everything I needed to do, and it felt like the work I did with her was starting to feel distant, almost like it came from another lifetime.

"I'm going to grab some dinner," Jax told me as we finished up for the day. "You want to join me?"

"I just have to finish putting these graphics together," I told him, gesturing to the pile of pictures on the table in front of us. We were trying to come up with a mood board, something we could give to the graphics team to work from.

"We can finish it up tomorrow," he reminded me.

I shook my head. "I want to get this done," I told him. "That's the only way I'm going to be able to relax tonight."

He grinned, leaning in the doorway for a moment. I could see the softness in his eyes, and it was clear he wanted to come over and give me a kiss, but he thought better of it, remembering where we were and what might happen if we did.

“Well, I’ll catch you later then, workaholic,” he teased before he headed off to leave me to it. Sometimes, I envied how he seemed to be able to just check out of work at the end of the day without any guilt, but hey, I worked hard. That was how I’d always been, and I knew nothing was going to change it.

“See you,” I called after him, and I turned my attention back to the pictures in front of me. But I was barely alone for a couple of minutes before someone knocked on the door.

“Jax, you don’t have to knock, this is your office too,” I started to tell him, but when I looked up and saw who was standing there, my lips parted in surprise.

“Oh, Ian,” I blurted out. “Is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine,” he replied. “Do you have a minute? I’d like to talk to you.”

“Sure,” I replied, doing my best to keep my tone calm. Was this about everything happening with Jax? Jesus, I hoped not. I didn’t want to deal with any more stress about it. I felt like I had already been through enough, with the worrying and the doubts and the questions revolving over and over again around my mind.

He closed the door behind him and took the seat next to mine.

“I’ve been talking with the other partners here at KICKS,” he explained to me. “About your future at this company.”

I tensed. Shit. This was it. He’d found something out, and he was going to get rid of me and keep Jax, just like I had been worried he would. I tried not to let the panic show on my face.

“Oh, okay?” I replied, my voice a little higher than it was normally.

“And obviously, your contract for this particular launch is going to be finishing soon,” he continued. “But we’ve been really impressed with the work you’ve done here, and we’d like to make you an offer.”

My eyes widened. This wasn’t where I had expected this to go.

“An offer?” I replied.

“Yes, we’d like to offer you the position of partner here at the company,” he replied.

I stared at him in total shock. There was no way I could have heard that right, was there? He wanted me to work for the company? Full time? In that prominent of a position?

It was a bigger offer than I’d ever had handed to me in my whole life, and

I felt like the world was shifting on its axis slightly as I tried to wrap my head around the hugeness of it. Something like this? I thought I would have to work years before I even came close to it, but here he was, offering it to me like it was the most obvious thing in the world?

There was no question in my mind what the answer was meant to be. No question at all. I grinned, so wide I was surprised I could even contain it on my face, and then, I nodded.

“Yes,” I replied. “I’d love that. I would *love* that.”

He grinned back at me.

“That’s great to hear,” he replied. “We’ll reach out with more information as soon as we get the chance, but trust me, the other partners are going to be thrilled to hear that you’re onboard in the long term. We need someone like you around, Morgan. Someone who really knows what they’re doing, with your amazing work ethic.”

I couldn’t keep the smile off my face, hearing him talk about me like that, knowing I had been recognized, that the hard work I had scrambled to do in these last few months had been noticed. It was like a weight had been lifted from my shoulders. All the questions I’d had about myself and my work here vanished as though there had been nothing there in the first place.

“Thank you, Ian. I can’t even begin to tell you how much this means to me,” I told him, doing my best to keep my voice steady, though it felt like it might bubble over with joy at any moment.

“We can’t wait to have you onboard, Morgan,” he told me. “But I’ll leave you to it for now. Don’t want to get in the way of that amazing work, right?”

“Right,” I agreed. And as I looked back down at the pages in front of me, I could hardly see them through the happy tears.

CHAPTER 57



JAX

I rolled up to the office, running a hand through my hair and checking how I looked in the reflection in the glass of the door. Okay, yeah, I could have gone home and changed before I came to them to pitch them the idea I was working with right now, but I wanted to get this out there sooner rather than later, get a feel for whether or not they were going to be open to the thought that Derrick had placed inside my head a few days ago.

Coming straight from the KICKS office, I had felt like I had been hit with a bolt of energy, and I knew I needed to use it to try and get through to the other guys about bringing her onboard.

Working with her, I just knew there was no way I could let her go back to the other company after this. We made so much sense working together, and I would have been a fool to let that slip through my fingers. I wanted to make the most of her, and I was sure we could offer her more interesting, and better paid, work than wherever she was at right now.

It was just a matter of finding the right way to pitch it to them. Derrick might have been onboard with it already, but it might take a little more convincing to get the others to see it from his point of view. They hadn't worked with her, but I had to hope they would trust me enough to go along with everything I knew was true. She was seriously good at her job, and making her part of the team would take us to the next level I knew we needed to aim for.

I strolled up to the office and bumped into Seb just as he stepped out from his.

"Hey," he said, looking me up and down. "What's wrong with you? You look like you slept in the subway."

“Just a busy day,” I replied. I didn’t want to admit that I’d hardly had time to get ready this morning because I had woken up all tangled with her. I was sure they would make fun of me for it, and I didn’t want them to think that I was letting that influence the pitch I was about to make.

“How about dinner? On me tonight?” I suggested. “There’s that Korean place around the corner, they usually have some good stuff.”

“Works for me,” he replied with a shrug. “Let me see if everyone else is onboard too.”

He headed around the other offices as I checked my email and tried to form the best approach to this to convince them I had come up with a good idea. Derrick had sounded pretty keen, so he might have done some of the groundwork for me already, but I couldn’t rely on that. I had to be ready to take on any doubts they might have. Even though she would be a major asset, I knew how precious the guys could be about who came into this place. I got it, given we had built it from the ground up, but I wouldn’t have put something like this forward if I didn’t think it was a good idea.

“They’re in,” Seb told me as he rounded the corner again to join me. “Come on, let’s get out of here before Max decides he wants to work for the rest of the night instead.”

We headed out to the restaurant and were led to a great table with a view over the gardens out the back. We came here enough and tipped well enough that they seemed to remember us when we came around, so a good table was usually in the cards for us.

“What exactly did you bring us out here for, Jax?” Max asked me, cocking an eyebrow.

“You mean I can’t just take you to dinner because I feel like it?” I asked, and Max laughed.

“Dude, come on,” he said, shaking his head. “I know you too well for that. What’s going on?”

“Let’s order first,” I told him. “Then we can talk about it.”

“I knew it, he’s trying to bribe us,” Max replied, but he didn’t seem too mad about it. Everyone ordered their food, and as we waited for it to arrive, I leaned forward, clasping my hands on the table in front of me.

“I have a proposal for you,” I explained. “There’s someone I’d like to bring into the company, into the partnership.”

“Oh?” Graham asked, sounding surprised. I knew he was never exactly open to the idea of having someone new around. He preferred to stay focused

on just us, taking our work to the next level, but I was certain Morgan would make it easier to step up our game.

“Morgan,” I continued.

Max interjected at once. “What, as in your ex, Morgan?” he asked, sounding confused.

“She’s not my ex anymore.” I could see the shock on his face as I informed him, but I wasn’t here to break the news about us being officially back together. No, I was here because I had a business proposal for them, and I wanted them to hear me out.

“Listen, let me tell you about the experience she has,” I explained, and I started my sales pitch. I knew it was going to take just the right approach, just the right language, and just the right careful editing of everything I said to make them see this was more than just me trying to land my girlfriend a spot on our team. I wanted them to see how seriously I took this, even though it might have just looked like I was trying to force them into doing what I wanted. But it was more than just having her around, more than just getting a chance to work with her. I really believed she would fit into the atmosphere we had fostered in the office and bring her expertise to the game as well.

As I finished up, there was a silence around the table, and I found myself holding my breath as I waited for a response. I didn’t know what I expected any of them to say, but I was hoping it was going to be at least open-minded to the idea I was putting forward.

“So you want to bring her onboard as a partner,” Spencer said slowly, like he was trying to work out if he had heard me correctly.

I nodded. “I think she would be an asset to our team,” I explained. “And you know I wouldn’t even be considering this if I didn’t think it would help us out in the long term. She’s amazing at what she does, and with the knowledge and skills she has, she deserves a high-level position. I can vouch for her. I’ve seen the work she can do, and I wouldn’t be—”

“I don’t doubt that she’s good at her job,” Seb cut in. “But does that mean we give her a partner position? So soon?”

“I know the two of us work well together, and we could put together some seriously effective advertising,” I continued. “I think it’s what she deserves, a position at that level, after all the experience she’s gained. Anywhere else would be lucky to have her.”

“Advertising department, yes,” Max added. “But I don’t know about bringing her on as a partner. All of us, we’ve worked to get where we are,

and it doesn't feel right to just hand that to someone else."

"We wouldn't just be handing it to her," I pointed out, shaking my head. "She's not starting out in this business. She knows what she's doing."

"In advertising," Seb replied. "If she's going to work for us, and I'm not totally averse to the idea, then it should be in the department she actually has the most skill in."

I felt my jaw tense slightly as I listened to them talk. It wasn't as though they didn't have a point. I was sure if someone had come to me trying to pitch the same thing I was right now, I would have had the exact same response, but there was still a part of me that wanted them to just accept what I was telling them and see that I had a damn good point when it came to all of this. I knew what I was doing, I always scouted out people who were a good fit for us, and they just weren't going to accept it because it was her?

"Would you feel differently if I wasn't involved with her?" I asked bluntly. No point beating around the bush. I knew it was a factor.

"Would you?" Graham asked, raising his eyebrows at me.

I had to admit, that one caught me off guard. I hadn't given it much thought, how things might have gone if I hadn't been seeing her again. I knew dating her had allowed me to see those parts of her, her skill, that I might never have been able to see clearly if we hadn't been together, but I liked to think I would have been clear-headed enough to spot her talent and her potential even if she hadn't been mine, too.

"Look, I get it. You guys work well together, and she sounds like she knows what she's doing," Max replied. "But I think she'd be better off starting with advertising, at least for now. That's where she thrives, right?"

I sighed and nodded. They had a point. The food began to fill up the table, and we started to tuck in, the conversation we'd just had being forgotten.

By the time we finished up our meal, Derrick seemed to be able to tell how dejected I was about how that conversation had turned out. As we headed outside to get our respective cabs back home, he slapped me on the shoulder.

"It was a noble attempt, buddy," he told me. "But I think you're going to have to come up with something a little more convincing to get the rest of them onboard."

"I guess you're right," I agreed with a sigh. I should have known it wouldn't be that easy. These guys hadn't gotten as far as they had in business

because they were completely willing to take on any idea that came their way. They needed to be convinced, and I just had to find the right way to approach it to make it happen.

I climbed into the cab and leaned my head back against the seat as I watched the city rush by outside the window. My mind raced along with the wheels beneath me as I tried to work out what I was going to do next, how I was going to find a way to convince them this was the right way to go about it. They just had to see her through my eyes, and it might not have been easy to get that to click for them, but I was sure I was going to be able to find a way to do it. It would just take a little skill on my part to get them on my side, to get them to see her for the amazing woman she was.

I smiled as I thought of her, wishing she could be waiting at home for me by the time I got back. I knew she was likely still in the KICKS office, finishing up everything she had to take care of, her dedication always an inspiration to me.

And I was sure it would have been an inspiration to the guys, too, if they had just given her the chance I was asking for.

CHAPTER 58



MORGAN

“Ugh, I’m so nervous.” I sighed as I shuffled through the papers for the hundredth time that day.

“You’re going to be fine,” Jax told me, giving my hand a squeeze.

I glanced around to make sure nobody was watching before I squeezed it back. We were at the office, after all, and the last thing I wanted was to be busted when I didn’t expect it.

It was almost our last day working together. We had finished pulling together the campaign we’d been working on for the last couple of weeks, and I couldn’t believe it was going to be over so quickly. Yes, I was looking forward to stepping up and taking on the role of partner that they had offered me, but I was going to miss the hell out of working with him, too.

We were practicing for the presentation we were going to give the next day, and I had been doing my level best not to let my nerves get the best of me this whole time. I knew it was going to be tough, keeping myself focused and on topic, as I found myself rambling sometimes when I got up there in front of people, but I was going to be able to handle it. No doubt in my mind, I could pull this off. I couldn’t wait to show them everything we had put together and prove that they had made the right choice putting us on this job together.

“You want to run through it again?” he asked me.

I nodded, rolling my shoulders back. “You’re going to work the projector, right?” I asked him, and he nodded.

“If you want me to. I can always jump in if you’re struggling, though.”

“Hopefully I’m not going to be floundering that badly,” I replied, shaking my head and grinning. “Hope I can keep on top of it all, right?”

“Hope so,” he agreed, and the way he was looking at me, it was as though he could never in a million years have imagined I was going to mess this up. Having his confidence in me, it really did make everything better, and I was so glad he would be in the room with me when I took on this presentation.

“Okay, so,” I began, taking a deep breath and trying to steady myself. It was ridiculous how nervous I was right now. I wasn’t even in front of them yet. I was going to need to get my shit together if I could pull this off the next day. Or at least practice until it came out of my mouth like natural, without a second thought.

“We believe the best approach for this shoe is a blend of classic and more social-media-focused marketing techniques,” I began, and I continued to run down the list of everything we had put together. I was speaking so quickly, I had to pause to heave in a great big breath, and he laughed.

“You’ll need to go a bit slower than that,” he told me. “You want them to hear everything you’re saying, right?”

“Right,” I agreed, and I closed my eyes and inhaled slowly, trying to cool myself off a little. I knew I had to be able to hold it together. I couldn’t go speeding through this presentation like I had somewhere to be. The most important thing was showing them I had total confidence in what we were putting forward, which I did. I was just nervous about getting it all across to them. This was the result of all the work we had been doing over the previous few weeks. I wanted them to see that we hadn’t been wasting their time, that they had made the right choice putting us on this together.

I managed to get the rest of the presentation done, this time without rushing it too much, and Jax offered me a high-five when I was done.

“That was awesome,” he told me, smiling up at me proudly. “They’re going to be so pleased with what we have. You just need to deliver the whole thing like that, and we’re going to be golden.”

“You think so?” I asked, biting my lip. I didn’t want to let him down. I knew how much work he had put in to get this project to the stage it was at, and he deserved to have his hard work recognized.

“I know so,” he replied, and he gestured for me to sit down next to him.

I took a seat and leaned back to catch my breath. I felt like I had just run a damn marathon, and that hadn’t even been in front of the partners. God, I was going to have to get my shit together if I was going to pull this off.

But as he sat there next to me, I felt myself start to relax slightly. I knew I could manage it if he was there. When he looked at me, it was with such

certainty that I knew he didn't have a shadow of a doubt in my ability to do any of this. He knew I was capable of it, and it was his confidence that gave me the motivation I needed to keep going.

I hadn't told him about the offer they'd made to me. I was still working out exactly how I wanted to phrase it to him, how I wanted to share that news. I knew he would have to find out eventually, but I didn't want to let it get in the way of the work that we were doing here together. I needed to stay focused on the task at hand for now, not get distracted by thinking about everything I was going to do afterward. I might have been excited about the thought of this partner position, but we had a contract to finish up first, and I knew they were relying on us to do a good job.

I slipped a hand onto his knee, giving it a squeeze. "I'm going to miss working with you when this is done," I murmured.

He covered my hand with his. "Yeah, me too," he agreed. "I've gotten used to having you around."

"Oh, so that's all it is, is it?" I laughed. "You're just used to having me kicking around here?"

"You know that's not what I meant," he protested, shaking his head.

"I know," I replied softly as I looked at him, eyeing him, taking him in. We had been through so much together over the years, even though there had been all that distance between us for a while. What mattered was that we were back. We had found each other. Having him back here after all those years, it felt like the universe had always meant for us to find one another again, meant for us to end up here, looking into each other's eyes, staring at each other as though nothing else in the world mattered.

"I missed you so much, you know, when we were broken up," he told me as he turned my hand over in his, brushing his fingers over my palm lightly. "I never stopped thinking about you."

I felt a pang in my chest. I still felt so guilty for leaving him like that, thinking it was the best thing for the two of us, thinking he would have been better off without me, given that I was going to be so focused on my career.

"I'm still so sorry I did that," I murmured. "It wasn't—If I could go back in time now, I'd undo it. I would."

"You don't have to apologize for it," he told me, smiling, and I could tell he meant it. I still didn't know how he could forgive me for the way I had treated him before. Just thinking about it made me feel ashamed, and I hated how I had acted, hated how I had been too focused on my career to think

about how much I wanted to be with him. I thought he would have stood in the way of everything I wanted to achieve, but I could see now that we were there to support each other through it, there to drive each other to reach heights we might not have thought possible before. I knew if it hadn't been for him, I wouldn't have come up with the approach I had for the KICKS contract, and I was so damn glad I had the chance to come together with him and bounce ideas off of him and make sure that we reached the heights we were both totally capable of.

"I still feel bad about it," I admitted.

He shrugged. "It doesn't matter to me."

"Maybe if I explained it."

"Morgan, you explained it well enough then," he said. "It doesn't matter why you did it. All that matters to me is that you're back here right now, back here with me. It was all I ever wanted. Whatever made you decide to do what you did, that's in the past now, and I want to leave it there. Okay?"

"Okay," I breathed, feeling a small smile cross my lips. I was so glad he seemed willing to put it behind us, forget about the enormity of what I had done. He was right. Whatever had come before this didn't matter now, not really. I was just glad we had found each other again, found our way back to each other, even though I would never in a million years have guessed we would get to this stage.

"We should call it for the day," he said as he looked down at his watch.

"You don't think I need to go over it again?" I asked, frowning, and he shook his head.

"You keep going over it and you're going to start overthinking it, and that's the last thing we need," he replied. "You don't want to practice it to death. You don't need to. It's exactly the way it needs to be."

"You're right," I agreed, nodding. He had a point. I would get into my head about it if I ran it through time after time, and it was already pretty much down pat. It was just a matter of handling my nerves on the day, and I would be okay. And I had a couple of days to cool off my anxiety. By the time I walked back through this door tomorrow, I vowed to myself I was going to be able to handle anything they threw at me. Whatever questions they had, I would be ready to answer them. It was my job to, after all.

"So what do you want to do now?" I asked him.

He shrugged. "How about dinner?" he suggested. "Go out somewhere? So you can celebrate finally being done with me."

I laughed. “Sounds good to me,” I agreed.

“What, the being done with me part, or the dinner part?”

“Both,” I teased him playfully. “Come on, let’s get packed up, and we can get out of here. I think there’s a Chinese place around the corner. Something always smells good down there anyway.”

“God, yes, Chinese sounds perfect right now,” he groaned, clapping his hands together just at the thought of it. “Come on, let’s go eat our body weight in spring rolls.”

“Agreed,” I replied, and we headed out of the building. I hoped nobody had overheard our conversation, but hey, with just a few days left, how much damage could it do? Maybe when I was partner, I could rewrite those relationship rules and make it a little easier for the next person.

Or maybe I would be too busy with him to give a damn about it.

CHAPTER 59



JAX

“God, it all looks so good.” She sighed as she looked over the menu. “I don’t even know what to pick.”

“Right?” I said, shaking my head. “Maybe we should just get the whole menu. It looks amazing.”

“Not sure it’s in my budget to afford that much,” she replied, laughing.

I shrugged. “It’s in mine. You pick anything you want. Oh, and a bottle of wine to go with it.”

“You sure?” she asked, sounding surprised, and I nodded.

“I want this to be a treat for both of us,” I replied. “We’ve worked so hard on the KICKS project, I think we deserve a little time to blow off steam, don’t you?”

“You know, I couldn’t agree more,” she replied. “Thank you, Jax.”

“Anytime,” I replied. I hoped that she knew I meant it. It might be difficult for her to believe I was really willing to give her just about anything she asked for, but I couldn’t think of a thing in the world I wouldn’t have been willing to gift her right now, if it meant I got to see that gorgeous smile on her face.

We picked out a half-dozen dishes to share, along with the most expensive bottle of wine on the menu, because it felt like we had a whole lot to celebrate. I knew we weren’t officially over and done with the contract yet, but with the campaign we had put together, there would be no way they wouldn’t be happy with everything we had pulled off.

We sipped on the wine and dug into the food, sharing our dips and delicious little bites of dishes we might not otherwise have tried. I grinned as she caught a drop of plum sauce that was threatening to make a break for her

wine before it could fall into the glass, catching it on the tip of her finger and then sucking it off.

“I need to do more projects with you if this is how we celebrate,” she said as she took a breather and sipped on her second glass.

“You don’t have to work to get a dinner date with me, Morgan,” I told her, and she smiled.

“You know, I’m really going to miss working with you,” she said, cocking her head to the side. “I’ve really enjoyed it. I didn’t think we would work together as well as we did, but I’m glad I gave it a chance, you know?”

“Hey, maybe we might be working together again in the future,” I replied, flashing her a grin. I had been trying not to drop too many hints about bringing her on at the firm, not until I had the agreement of all the guys to go with it, but I couldn’t resist. After a couple glasses of wine, it was just too difficult to keep my mouth shut.

“You think?” she replied, perking up at the thought.

“Who knows?” I shot back, lifting the wine to my lips.

She smiled. “It’s not just the work, though,” she admitted. “It’s just been so good to be back around you again. I never thought we would see each other again, not after what happened back in college, but now, this? It just feels right, you know?”

“It really does,” I agreed as I found my eyes drawn down to her lips. I could imagine how they tasted of this great wine, and I wanted to kiss her in that moment.

“I don’t think I’ve had a work-life balance like this in, well, pretty much my whole adult life, actually,” she continued. “I guess that’s how it works when you’re on a project with the person you’re dating.”

“Oh, dating already, huh?” I joked. “Don’t know if I’m ready for that.”

“Well, I am, you asshole.” She giggled. “I just... I’m really happy we got to do this. I really hope we get to do it again sometime, you know?”

“I hope so too,” I replied, and I considered hitting her with it right there, the plan I had to bring her onboard, but I wasn’t sure how she would take it. Better to hold off until we had figured ourselves out over at the firm. I didn’t want to promise something I couldn’t follow through on. I was never going to be that guy to her, the guy who couldn’t back up everything that came out of his mouth.

“Sorry, I know we shouldn’t be talking about work right now,” she murmured, shaking her head.

“Why not?” I replied, frowning. “Is everything okay down there?”

“Oh, yeah, for sure,” she assured me. “I just... there are some changes coming.”

“Changes?” I replied, ears perking up. “What kind of changes?”

“Good changes, don’t worry,” she replied. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have brought it up. I’m a bit too tipsy to go explaining it all now.”

“If you say so,” I replied, but I had made a mental note to bring this up again as soon as I got the chance. It seemed like something she wanted to talk about, even if she couldn’t quite find the words for it now.

We turned our attention back to the food, back to the wine, and the conversation flowed once more—not about work, but about the two of us. About where we wanted to travel next when we had the chance, what we wanted to do. Now that we had a little more cash to our names, we didn’t have to worry about holding back on those dreams we’d always had. No, we could be honest, come out, and say it when we talked about where we wanted to travel to, and the thought of adventuring the world with her by my side was everything to me. Even though we had taken the long way round to get to this point, what mattered was that we were here now, right?

Once we had finished up dinner, I paid the bill and draped my jacket around her shoulders while we waited for the cab to arrive.

She flashed me a smile. “Were you always this much of a gentleman?” she teased.

I clapped a hand to my chest as though mortally offended by what she had just said. “Of course I have been,” I replied. “Come on, let’s get a cab. You want to go back to my place?”

“I really do,” she agreed as she gently slipped her hand into mine. She didn’t seem to care who saw us right now, and I couldn’t blame her, not when we were so close to being finished with KICKS.

We had been holding back for so long now, holding off on being honest about how much we wanted each other, and the thought of finally being able to tell the world just how I felt about her made everything light up in my mind.

We slipped into the cab, and she turned to look out the window at the sparkling lights of the city beyond. The glimmer of them bounced off her face, off her eyes, and I couldn’t stop staring at her. How was it that she just seemed to get more and more beautiful with every moment I stared at her? With every day that passed, I fell for her harder, harder than I had ever

thought possible.

When we arrived back at my place, I offered her a hand to help her out of the cab. I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Maybe it was the wine, or maybe it was knowing she was finally mine again after what felt like a lifetime apart, but she was here, with me, and I couldn't think of a damn thing in the whole world that mattered more than that. Did she have any idea how gorgeous she was to me? How much I had fallen for her, all over again?

We made our way up to my place, and I poured her a drink as she took a seat on the couch that looked out over the window to the city below.

"I really love your place," she said as she snuggled in next to me, lifting the wine to her lips. "It's beautiful here."

I didn't say it, but I was already thinking about how it could be our place if we played our cards right. I loved the thought of her living here with me. Probably too soon to be thinking like that, but after all we had been through, with all the history behind us, it just seemed like the natural next step to me.

"I'm just glad you're here," I confessed before I could stop myself. Normally, I wouldn't have been so forward about my emotions, but I didn't see any reason to hold back now. We could be a couple for real when this contract was over, and I was ready to get there already, ready to enjoy that part of our rediscovered love for each other.

She turned to me, reaching out to brush her fingers over my cheek.

"Me too," she murmured.

I leaned back for a moment, just looking into her eyes. I still couldn't quite believe it, sometimes, that she had finally made her way back to me. After so long apart, I still hadn't forgotten how good it felt to be here with her, how much I loved the way she looked at me. I couldn't deny how I felt about her, and I would never be able to. The reason I had kept that ring for so long was because some part of me had known I was going to need it, and I was so glad I had listened to that instinct and believed it. I wasn't sure when, but I knew I was going to have the chance to slip it onto her finger soon, like I had meant to all those years ago, and it was as though everything was finally coming full circle.

"There wasn't a day after you left that I didn't think about you," I told her, slipping my hand to the back of her neck.

She closed her eyes, smiling and softening against me. "Really?" she murmured, as though she couldn't quite believe it.

"Not a single one," I assured her. "You were always on my mind. No

matter what.”

She opened her eyes again and shifted toward me on the couch. Our knees were touching, but it wasn't enough. With her, it never was. It was always like my body demanded more, demanded everything she was willing to give me, no matter what form it took. I pulled her closer, and, at last, our lips touched. The taste of the wine on her mouth, the smile on her lips as we kissed for the first time, it felt like home to me, sinking into a place I had always known and always missed.

I pulled her on to my lap, pushing my hands into her hair so I could pull her even closer. The feel of her body on top of mine, of her kiss as it deepened into something more needy, more wanting, all of it came together to drive me crazy in a way I didn't even know was possible. How many times had we been together like this? And would the thrill of it ever fade? I knew it never would.

She wound her arms around me, grinding down against my lap and kissing me passionately, our tongues coming together as she moaned against my mouth. I could feel her body beginning to tense, silently begging for more, for as much of this as I was willing to give her.

As though anything in the world could have held me back. When I was with her, there was not a chance in hell I could pretend I didn't want her.

CHAPTER 60



MORGAN

The two of us pulled off our clothes, tugging at each other's clothes until we were naked on that couch together, until it was just the two of us and there was nothing left to keep us apart from one another. He pushed me back a little and looked down at me, a smile curling up his lips as he checked me out.

"God, you're so fucking gorgeous," he murmured before he leaned forward to kiss me all over again.

I was straddling him, and I could feel him nudging at my entrance as I moved against him. I needed him inside me, now. I needed to feel him. With all the tension of the last few days, nothing could have come close to giving me what I wanted until I had him exactly where I wanted him.

He wrapped his hand around his cock, guiding himself toward me, and I took the hint. Lifting myself up slightly, I moved so that I was hovering just above his cock and then slid myself down on top of him.

"Oh, fuck, yeah," he moaned as he looked down to watch himself vanishing inside me.

I glanced down to see it, too, to see him entering me like he couldn't get enough of me. He thrust up, pushing up into me and filling me with his cock in one swift motion.

He took hold of my hips and held me steady as he fucked me, watching my face as the pleasure started to get the better of me. I couldn't hide it, couldn't even come close. The intensity of it was just way, way too much to handle. I pushed my hands into his hair and kissed him again as he drove himself into me, our tongues coming together hard and hungry for each other. How was it, after all this time, the two of us still made this much sense

together? How was it that it could still feel as hot and heavy as the first time? Maybe even more so?

I pushed myself down on top of him, enveloping him inside me as deep as I could, moving my hands to his shoulders and digging my fingers in as I gripped on for dear life. I could already feel the orgasm stirring inside me, the feeling of it getting the better of me. It always did. It was like, as soon as he laid his hands on me, something in my body was already teetering on the edge of a release I didn't even know I had been waiting for.

"You feel perfect," he moaned in my ear, sliding one arm around my waist to press me against him properly.

I moved my mouth to his neck, feeling the pulse of his heart in his chest, feeling how excited he was and how badly he wanted me. I loved it. Loved him.

I pushed that thought away. Now wasn't the time. It was just the rush of emotions that came with hooking up that had me feeling that way, and I wasn't going to blurt it out now, no matter how much my mind was telling me to just whisper the words to him, once and for all.

I moved back, pressing my forehead against his and breathing deep, inhaling his exhale until the two of us were in total pace with each other. Almost as though we were moving as one person, one being, heading toward the same crest of pleasure we both wanted so badly.

And, sure enough, a few moments later, I felt it. His cock inside me, throbbing with fullness, was almost too much for me to take. He gasped, inhaling sharply, and I leaned back to look at him, taking in the sight of him right there in front of me. I loved watching him come. Nothing turned me on like knowing I was enough for him, enough for him to go over the edge and into that release he needed so badly. His eyes were dark with desire as he looked up at me, his whole face written with an open want.

And it was that sight which pushed me over the edge myself. I felt the shock of it course through me, beginning from between my legs and spreading out to consume my whole body. I held on to him for dear life, wrapping my arms around him tight, hanging on to him as though there was no way I was ever going to be able to let him go.

I rocked on top of him, not quite ready for this to be over yet, and then, once I felt him starting to shrink inside me, I slowly eased myself off and slipped down onto the couch next to him. He reached for my hand and gave it a squeeze, a silent acknowledgement of just how good that had been because

there was no way in hell the two of us could have talked right now.

“We should get some rest,” he said finally, though he still sounded a little out of breath. I nodded. He was right. We had that meeting to think of, and the last thing I wanted was to be exhausted when I headed down to it.

“Yeah, I think I’m going to sleep like a damn baby tonight.” I giggled, and he reached over and tucked a loose strand of hair behind my head, grinning at me before he leaned in to steal a quick kiss.

He got to his feet and pulled me into his arms. I laughed and wrapped my arms around him, hanging on for dear life as he carried me through to bed.

“You know, I’m capable of walking under my own power,” I told him as he laid me down in bed.

“Yeah, well, maybe I want to do everything for you,” he replied with a shrug.

“You think you could do one thing for me, actually?” I asked him, and he nodded.

“Anything.”

“Could you set a few alarms?” I asked him. “Just to make sure we don’t oversleep tomorrow. I know I’m not going to be able to rest easy until I know there are at least three alarms ready to get me up tomorrow morning.”

“Sure thing,” he promised me, and he grabbed a pair of sweatpants to throw on as he made his way around the house to set those alarms for me. I watched as he headed out of the room, and I couldn’t help but smile.

He was so good to me. So damn good to me that, sometimes, I wondered if I deserved it. I had been the one to split up with him all those years ago, after all, but he treated me like I had been showering him with love ever since we had first met.

As though he had been waiting for us to get back together, all this time.

As I listened to him move around the house, I wondered when I was going to tell him about the deal that KICKS had offered me. I wasn’t sure what it was that had been keeping me from coming clean to him about it so far, but I wasn’t ready to talk to him about it yet. Maybe I was worried it would distract us from the presentation we still had to take care of, or maybe it was something else. Maybe I was concerned he would get jealous, and it would throw a wrench in the works of the relationship that had been going so well this far in.

I could have come clean with him right then and there if I had wanted to. Gotten it off my chest the moment he stepped back into the room. Maybe it

would have been a good idea, to share it with him so we could celebrate together. I was sure he would be happy for me, really, considering the way he had been so supportive of everything that had happened since we'd gotten back together. Every win I had, he seemed to celebrate it like it was his own, and I was beyond grateful for how kind and supportive he was about them.

And yet, as he stepped back into the room, I found myself brushing it off. He smiled over at me, and then furrowed his brow slightly.

"Something on your mind?" he asked, and I shook my head, covering my mouth to stifle a yawn.

"No, I'm good," I replied. "Just tired. And a little nervous about tomorrow, I guess."

"You've got nothing to be nervous about, baby," he murmured to me as he slipped down into the bed with me and pulled me into his chest. "You're going to kill it. I know you are."

I smiled against his chest, burying my face into him happily. I loved how much he believed in me, like nothing in the world could have convinced him I was anything other than at the very top of my game. It made me believe it, too, even when I was having doubts about myself. I wasn't sure I would have been able to get where I was right now if it hadn't been for him throwing his weight behind me at every turn, telling me in all the ways that mattered that he knew I could take on everything that came my way.

He was going to be so proud when he heard about the partnership I had been offered with KICKS. I almost wanted to blurt it to him right then and there, but I knew he would have insisted on getting up, popping a bottle of champagne or something, celebrating the whole night away, and I wasn't ready for that yet. Not until we had finished the contract with them in the first place. What mattered was delivering on the project they had hired me for. If I flaked out on that at the last minute by turning up hungover or cocky because I felt like I got the job, it would have been a full blown disaster.

And so, I closed my eyes and listened to the slow in and out of his breathing below me as he started to drift off to sleep. Soon enough, we would have finished up our contract together, and I could tell him about the amazing opportunity that had arisen to change the future of my career. It might not have been what I expected, but hey, if the last few months had taught me anything, it was that sometimes, life threw some random shit at you—and sometimes, it was the best thing that had ever happened to you.

I leaned up to watch him as he slept, and I smiled and planted a kiss on

the corner of his mouth. My man. My perfect man. This man who would support me through anything, anything at all. This man who made me feel like I had someone in my corner, no matter what happened next.

I would take on tomorrow, no matter what it took, and we would nail it together. He believed in me, and that was the only thing I wanted to hang on to right now, the only thing I knew I needed. For the two of us to be together, working toward the same goal, on the same page and aiming for the same end point. I might have been keeping a little secret from him right now, but soon enough, I would tell him everything, and the two of us would be able to share in the excitement of what came next. The two of us, together, like it always should have been.

Even if a little nagging voice at the back of my mind was warning me that it might not be as easy as I wanted it to be.

CHAPTER 61



JAX

I heard a knock on the door and glanced up in surprise. I hadn't expected Morgan to come by to meet me so soon, but hey, if she was ready to go, so was I.

Morgan had left early this morning, shooting off back to her place so she could get ready for the meeting later today, and I knew she was practically vibrating with nervousness at the thought of what she had to do next. She had been tossing and turning all of last night, even as I had tried to soothe her and convince her to relax and get some sleep. I got it, I did. This was a big deal, and she didn't want to let anything get in the way of it.

But I knew she was going to kill it. She had done so well with everything else so far, I had no doubt in my mind she would knock this out of the park too. The two of us had been working hard to make this all come together, and I was so looking forward to seeing her reap the rewards of everything she had done, all the time and effort she had poured into this. It was what she deserved.

It was what we both deserved.

But when I opened the door, instead of seeing Morgan like I'd expected, I found myself looking at my brother. He grinned, spreading his arms wide in greeting.

"Hey there," he said. "Heard it's the day of your big meeting. You want to go out for a coffee and some breakfast?"

I glanced at my watch. Provided it wasn't far from the house, that sounded nice actually. "Just a quick one," I told him. "I'm meant to be meeting Morgan here soon, and I don't want to leave her in the lurch."

"You have my word," he promised me, planting a hand on his heart like

he was swearing to it. I grinned. Honestly, it would do me good to get out of the house and focus on myself for a while, relax before we headed down to that final meeting. It was going to be intense, taking it all on, and I didn't want to do anything to screw it up. From this moment on, I had to be on my best behavior, and I didn't want to let anything get in the way of that.

Max and I headed out to a coffee shop not far from my apartment, and he insisted on getting the food for me.

"Last thing you want to be worrying about today is paying for food," he said. "You're meant to be keeping your focus on getting KICKS to work with us again when this contract is done with, right?"

"KICKS aren't the only people I want to work with again," I replied as the waitress planted our food down in front of us.

My brother frowned, furrowed his brow. "You still on this whole thing with bringing Morgan onboard to work with us?" he asked, and he didn't exactly sound delighted about it.

"I'm not just on it," I replied, shaking my head. "I'm going to make it happen. It's as simple as that."

He sighed and shook his head. "You heard how the guys responded to the idea," he reminded me. "You're going to have to come up with something a little more convincing if you're going to get all of them onboard."

"I will," I replied. "You guys just have to see the kind of work she's capable of, and then you're going to see it from my perspective. This isn't just because I have feelings for her, this is because I know she could change the game in terms of the way we work as a company. For the better."

"You sure this isn't just about having feelings for her?" he asked, raising his eyebrows and looking at me with a stern expression on his face. I knew why he was coming at me so hard. He wanted to be sure I was really acting with the best of intentions, not just doing what I thought I needed to because I had been totally struck with my attraction to her and the thrill of getting her back.

"I know it's not."

"Because you wanted to commit to her before, and I know that didn't happen then," he continued. "Is this just a way for you to make that happen? A way for you to try and make sure she's not going to go anywhere?"

I shook my head again. I understood where the attitude came from, but I wasn't going to put up with the way he was talking to me right now. He didn't get how serious I was about this, even though it might have looked like

nothing more than just a basic lovestruck idea to him.

“She’s amazing at what she does, and you know I wouldn’t even have brought this up if I didn’t believe it,” I reminded him. “You trust my business sense, right?”

“For the most part.”

“So trust me on this,” I urged him. “It’s not just about Morgan and me.”

“But that’s part of it, right?” he pressed me.

I paused for a moment, leaned back as I considered what my answer was meant to be. I decided to try a different approach.

“You know how you feel about Judy?” I asked him.

As soon as I said her name, his entire face softened like I had just lifted weight off of his shoulders. It made me happy to see my brother so crazy about a woman, and I knew I could use that to get him to shift his view of the whole situation with Morgan.

“Yeah, I do,” he murmured, like he was drifting off to memories focused on her. I could already see him vanishing in front of me, into the sweet reminder of the woman he loved.

“And you think she could take on anything, right?”

“I know she could,” he fired back, almost a little defensive, as though he was shocked I would even come out and ask him that.

“Yeah, you do,” I agreed. “And that’s how I feel about Morgan. It’s not just about thinking she’s capable of the things she can do, it’s about *knowing*. And I *know* it, Max. I’m just asking you to trust me in that, right?”

I could see I had managed to get to him, even if he might not have wanted to admit it. I could see the slight shift in his attitude, as though it was all beginning to make sense to him. I leaned forward, knowing I could drive the point home and put this to bed once and for all.

“That’s why I want to bring her onboard,” I continued. “She can do amazing things, and I want to be there for her when she does. I want to be right there by her side when she gets to do it. Every step of the way.”

He paused for a moment, taking in what I had just said to him, but I could already tell I had managed to convince him. I grinned. He laughed, shaking his head.

“Shit, man, you make a good point,” he said.

I knew that invoking Judy would soften him to the idea of allowing Morgan a little closer to the position I wanted to give her in the company. It wasn’t just because I was with her, but yes, I had to admit, there was a part of

me that wanted to be there when she kicked all the ass I knew she was going to kick professionally. If we were on the same side, we could celebrate every win together, without reservation. I knew how it felt to work against her, and I knew how it felt to work *with* her, and I was pretty damn sure I was certain of which one I preferred.

We finished the rest of our breakfast, and I could tell I had managed to get Max to change his mind on all of this. And that was a major win for me. I knew he had influence in the office, and if I had Derrick and Max in my corner, I had a lot better chance of getting her into the position I knew she was going to kill at.

He gave me a hug outside the restaurant, pulled back, and looked me up and down.

“What is it?” I asked, confused as to why he was looking at me like he was only just seeing me for the first time.

“You just seem different, man,” he said. “In a good way, though. I think being with this girl suits you.”

“I know it does,” I replied. I didn’t need him to tell me, but there was something to be said for knowing that people could tell I had changed, too. I loved knowing that the shift she’d brought about in me was so clear, so obvious, and I hoped I could carry that energy into the meeting later.

“Good luck with your meeting,” he told me. “Call me afterwards to let me know how it goes, okay?”

“Will do,” I promised him, and I made my way back to my place to wait for Morgan. It wasn’t long till we had to head out for this meeting, and then I was going to pitch my idea to her—and make sure she was as up for all of this as I was. I knew she was going to jump right onboard the first chance she got. It was just a matter of phrasing it the right way and making sure she knew this was about her professional prowess, not just about how much I cared for her.

How much I loved her.

I might not have said it to her quite yet, but it was coming soon. I could feel it. The perfect moment hadn’t arrived yet, but it would be here soon, and I was sure it would feel right to hold off just a while longer until I knew she was ready to hear it.

Until I knew she was ready to start the rest of her life with me, once and for all.

CHAPTER 62



MORGAN

I fidgeted on Haley's couch, wondering if it was obvious how much damn energy I had to burn off right now. I didn't even know where to start, not really, not until I went through the door and into that meeting so I could put all the hard work into practice finally.

"You want another coffee?" Haley called to me from the kitchen, and I shook my head.

"I'm good," I replied. "If I have any more caffeine I'm pretty sure I'll burst, anyway."

"Yeah, fair," she agreed as she emerged from the kitchen. "You stressed about the meeting today?"

"That's an understatement," I muttered. I needed to get my shit together already.

I had come to Haley's to try and chill out before I had to head out to the meeting. I could have gone back to Jax, but I knew I would have just been thinking about work the whole time and there would have been no way for me to actually calm down. Here, at least, I didn't have to be on high alert about what was happening next. I could just unwind, or at least try to, even if it felt like my head was about to downright pop off my shoulders.

"I've never seen you this stressed about a meeting before," she said as she made her way back to the living room with another cup of coffee for herself.

"Yeah, it's an important one," I reminded her.

"But it's not just that, is it?" she said, frowning at me as though she could see what was going on inside my head right now. I shifted on the spot. I had hoped I wasn't making it quite as obvious as that, but clearly, I hadn't been covering my tracks as well as I had hoped.

“You can talk to me about it, you know,” she told me gently, reaching out to give my hand a squeeze.

And just like that, I couldn't stop myself. I felt the words tumbling from my mouth, and I started to tell her what had really been on my mind.

“It's just, when this meeting is over, I'm not going to be able to work with him again,” I explained to her. “It's going to be over. All that time we spent together, all the work we've done, all the...”

“All the closeness you've shared?” she finished up for me, and I nodded. Damn, I was so out of practice with talking about my emotions, I couldn't even put them into words. I had to get her to do it for me.

“Yeah, something like that,” I agreed softly. “I don't know what I'm going to do. And I don't know what he wants me to do, either. I just want to tell him how I feel, but I'm not sure how, and I'm not even sure that would change anything between us.”

“You really care about him, don't you?” she asked me, and I nodded.

“I really do,” I confessed. I wasn't going to tell her that I was pretty sure I loved him, not yet. I was going to make sure he was the first one I could say that to. But it was true. I did love him. And I needed to keep whatever we had right now going. I had to find the words for it, no matter how hard it was.

“Did you have as hard a time with your first breakup?” she teased me, and I smiled, a little sadly.

“No, because I don't think I really understood how hard it was to be without him,” I confessed. “If I'd known how difficult it was going to be, I would never have broken up with him. Not in a million years. Not in a whole lifetime. I didn't even realize how much I missed him until I saw him again. I had told myself I was okay without him. Maybe I even believed it, for a while, but I know better now. I know better than to try and lie to myself. It's just not something I can do anymore.”

“I didn't know you were such a romantic,” Haley told me, smiling as she listened to me speak.

I lowered my gaze down. “I know. I don't know what's come over me,” I admitted.

“No, it's a good thing,” she assured me. “I like seeing you like this. I know you have a hard time with how you feel sometimes, but you deserve to have someone in your life who makes you feel this way.”

“Yeah, even if I'm not sure he's going to be in my life much longer,” I muttered, shaking my head.

She frowned at me, surprised. “You really think he’s just going to leave after this?”

“No, it’s not that,” I replied. “It’s just, I mean, it was work that got in the way of things before, right? What if it happens again? And what if it’s for good this time? I’ve already burned through some of my chances with him when we were together in the first place. I can’t imagine he’s going to be in any kind of rush to give me a bunch more after what happened.”

“Whatever happened between you, that’s in the past now,” she replied. “He can’t hold it over your head. It wouldn’t be fair.”

“And neither was what I did to him back then,” I confessed, sighing heavily. “He was so good to me and I turned my back on it like I didn’t even give a damn.”

“But you do now, don’t you?” she asked, and I nodded. I felt like it would have been easier to get through this whole meeting ahead of me if I didn’t have to worry about what came next, but I wasn’t going to get that luxury. No, I had to go with what was right in front of me, even if it was tough, even if I wished I could skip to the part where we were together and we could just find a way to make this work, even if I didn’t know what that looked like quite yet.

“Yeah, I’m crazy about him,” I replied. “And I don’t know if I can be without him, not now that I’ve seen how good it is between us. It’s like I can see him properly for the first time, you know? Everything I thought I knew about him back in the day, I can see how much he’s changed. I can see how much he’s grown. I want to celebrate that. And in some ways, I think this job has let me do that, but when it’s over, I’m not sure what it’s going to look like—what *we’re* going to look like.”

“Hey, you don’t have to know that, do you?” she said, squeezing my hand. “You don’t have to have all the answers.”

“I wish I could believe that,” I replied with a sigh. “I really do. I just don’t know if I’ve got it in me to let go of the control like that. Not when I worked so hard to get it in the first place.”

“You need to be more like me,” she teased me lightly. “Go with the flow. Let things just happen. You never know where it could take you.”

“Yeah, and that’s exactly my problem,” I replied. “I don’t know where this is going to end up. And I don’t want to ruin things between us again, not when it feels like we’ve just got them back on track.”

She nodded, eyeing me for a long moment, and then smiled.

“It really sounds like you should talk to him about all of this before the meeting today,” she said. “Tell him how you feel. It’s the only way you’re going to know for sure one way or the other if he’s in the same place as you, and I know you don’t want to lose him.”

“I don’t,” I agreed, feeling a flutter in my chest. Even the thought of it was enough to make me nervous. I couldn’t imagine actually losing him after I had just managed to get him back into my life. I would never have been able to forgive myself. I would go into the future and kick my own ass if she did something to screw up what I knew was right for me.

“So talk to him,” she urged me. “Figure out what’s going on in his head.”

“And what if he’s as worried as me about all of it?” I asked her, looking up into her eyes. I wanted her to tell me it was all going to be okay, but I knew she couldn’t give me that. I knew nobody could but him, and yet, the fear that it might not be enough, that we might not have built a strong enough foundation to move forward after we were finished working on this project together, made my head spin dangerously. I could have puked right then and there thinking about it.

“Then you’ll know he cares as much as you do,” she replied, raising her eyebrows pointedly. Okay, she had me there. If he was freaking out about it as much as I was, then there would be no denying he saw this in the same light I did. That he saw what we had started to build here as something precious, something important, something worth fighting for, even if we weren’t entirely sure how we were going to do it. With both of our careers so important to us, how would we fit in the start of this blooming new relationship around it? Would something have to give?

And if it did, would I let it?

I fidgeted a little more, trying to burn off the excess energy that felt as though it was rushing through every part of me. If I didn’t do something to figure out what was going on between Jax and me soon, I was probably going to burst into flames there on the spot.

“Talk to him before the meeting,” Haley urged me. “So you’re not going into it all worried about what’s happening with you two. I know you don’t want this to get in the way of your job, not when you’ve worked so hard to get here.”

“You’re right,” I told her, even though I was still mentally twisting around the question of how exactly I would talk to him about this. How did I tell him what I wanted, how I felt, when I had been utterly out of practice at

talking about my emotions these last few years? Even the thought of it made my tongue feel heavy and useless, like it could never in a million years articulate what I really wanted to say.

I wished this meeting would never come so I could live in this fantasy world a little longer, this world where he and I were together and nothing got in the way of it.

But I couldn't keep hanging out here and hoping for the best. No, I had to get out into the world and do something to hold on to the man I loved—and put to rest this doubt and fear which seemed to nag at me every time I closed my eyes.

I wasn't going to lose him. I refused. No matter what it took, I would find a way to make this work.

I had to.

CHAPTER 63



JAX

Morgan knocked on my door and I opened it to find her looking stunning on the other side.

She also looked as though she might burst with tension as she hovered in front of me, waiting for me to say something.

“What’s wrong?” she blurted out, looking down at her outfit. “Is it something I’m wearing? Do you think it’s a bad choice for the meeting?”

“You look amazing,” I told her, and it was the truth. Yeah, maybe I was biased, but the pantsuit she had on looked the perfect mix of professional and sexy, not that she was going for the latter, but I called it like I saw it.

“I feel like I’m going to faint just thinking about the presentation today,” she groaned, rubbing a hand over her face and stepping inside. “How are you so calm right now?”

“Because I made sure you were the one doing the talking,” I teased. She fired a look at me, pouting.

“Oh, so that’s what it was about?” she asked. “Not about having faith in me, you just didn’t want to do it yourself?”

“Because I knew you’d do way better than I would,” I assured her. “And I still think that. You’re going to kill it.”

“Or kill myself before I get there,” she groaned.

I reached out to give her hand a squeeze. “You want to grab a coffee and go over it before we head in?”

She nodded. “I know you said we shouldn’t keep running through it, but one more time won’t hurt, right?”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” I replied, and we headed out to my car so I could drive her to a coffee shop close to the KICKS facility.

Her nerves were intense, but it felt like it was about more than just the job at hand. I wished I could get it into her head that everything was going to be okay, but she had clearly already let herself get stuck on the idea that it was all going to go to shit at any second. She was good at this, really, really damn good, and I hoped I could get her to see that without letting her fear or doubt get in the way. I understood where she was coming from, but at the same time, I didn't want her to blow this for herself just because she was getting all nervous.

We took a seat at the coffee shop, and she twisted up sugar packets in her hand as she tried to pull herself together.

"You okay?" I asked, and she nodded, though I could tell it was a downright lie. I paused for a moment as I looked at her, wondering if this was about the meeting—or if it might have been about us, about what was going to happen when all of this was over.

It had been on my mind, too, and I hoped I could cut through all of her nerves to get her to tell me what the truth really was. I could only imagine how much of a mess her head was in. I doubted I was going to be able to convey what I needed to when it came to us, either. The thought of saying something to screw all of this up, when I felt like we were just getting back to where we needed to be as a couple? Yeah, I couldn't live with myself if I managed to shoot myself in the foot.

"Yeah, I'm fine, I just..." she murmured, and she looked up at me, her eyes filled with a million questions I wished I could have had the answer to.

"You can talk to me about it," I promised her, reaching out to give her hand a squeeze. "If you need to. I'm here for you, whatever you need."

"I know you are," she replied, and she brushed her thumb across my hand lightly, looking down at our fingers intertwined on the table in front of us.

"We have this in the bag," I told her. "Everything's perfect. You just need to get up there and get them to see it, and we're all good, right?"

"Yeah, I know," she replied, but the doubt still remained there in her eyes.

I scanned her face, searching for some indication as to what was actually happening in there, but I couldn't pick out any more than I already had.

"Come on, let's have this coffee and go over it one more time," I told her.

"As if I need any more caffeine," she joked, finally cracking a smile. "I feel like I'm going to take flight at any second."

I laughed, and it seemed to break some of the tension. She turned her

attention to the notes she had in her phone, and we ran through the presentation again. Even though she was nervous, I could barely tell with the confidence she spoke with. It was like she was commanding a whole room full of people, and I listened on, a little spellbound.

She had always had this effect on me, though. I was sure I was somewhat biased when it came to her, but I didn't give a damn. I just wanted to listen to her speak.

By the time she was done, her cheeks had started to flush a little, but she looked up to meet my gaze and smiled hopefully. "You think that's going to work?"

"I think it is," I replied with a nod. "You sound great. If you can do that in the meeting, we've got it in the bag."

"Yeah, let's just hope I don't find some way to fuck it up." She sighed.

"Morgan, you've got to stop talking about yourself like that," I told her. "You're good at this. Like, really, really good at this. You wouldn't have gotten this far if you weren't."

"I know," she murmured, lowering her gaze to look at her notes again. "I just..." She trailed off.

I waited for her to finish up what was on her mind. I knew there was something bugging her, something getting under her skin. She was just having a hard time putting it into words. I wished I could ease it out of her, just find a way to cut to the chase and get her to admit what was bothering her.

Because I had a feeling it was about us. And if there was one thing I could put right, it was to put her mind at ease about where we were going next.

"Go on," I urged.

"It's nothing," she replied, shaking her head. "It doesn't matter."

Suddenly, a flush of resolve moved through her, and she straightened her shoulders, pulling them back and nodding.

"It's going to be fine," she told me. "We're going to be fine. I know it."

I wasn't sure if she was talking about the meeting or something else. I could have asked her, but dropping a big-ass conversation on her like that before she had to walk into the KICKS meeting seemed unfair.

"We are," I promised her, and I meant it. I didn't care what it took, how much we had to fight for it, how far we had to change our lives around to make this work. There wasn't a change in the world I wasn't willing to make

if it meant I got to be with the woman I loved, the woman of my dreams.

Suddenly, both of our phones buzzed with a text. I looked down to see what mine was and felt a little wave of nervousness course through me. It was from the KICKS rep, Ian, telling us to come down to the office. They were ready for us and wanted to get this meeting going soon.

“You ready to go?” I asked her, and she nodded. The resolve she had stirred up still seemed to be there, much to my relief, and I knew she was going to kick ass today. She was so good at this, so much better than she gave herself credit for, and they were going to see it just the same way I did.

“You’re going to kill it,” I told her as I offered her my hand to help her out of her chair. She was trembling slightly as she got to her feet, but I wouldn’t have been able to notice if I hadn’t been touching her. She was getting better at hiding it, at least.

“I know,” she replied, and there she was, the cocky, confident girl I knew. The girl who could handle anything that the world threw at her.

The girl I loved and had loved for longer than I could remember now.

“Let’s get out of here,” I told her, and we made our way back to my car outside.

She turned on the radio as we pulled out of the parking lot, and rolled down the window, letting the cool air course over her face, lifting strands of her hair up and making them dance in the wind.

She looked so free right now, as though nothing in the world could touch her. And if I had anything to do with it, nothing would. I was going to do everything in my power to make sure she felt like she had destroyed this upcoming meeting, no matter what happened.

I reached over and put my hand on her thigh. No matter what happened next, we were together, and I couldn’t give a damn about whatever the universe chose to throw at us.

CHAPTER 64



MORGAN

I strode into the office with all the confidence I could muster. I was going to kill this. I already had. Otherwise they wouldn't have offered me that position. I knew this was going to go well. I had decided it had to.

And nothing was going to get in my way.

I headed toward the reception desk, and the girl smiled up at me and pointed through to the meeting room down the hall.

"They're already waiting for you," she told me, and I felt a fizz of excitement at the thought that they already knew me well enough to recognize what I was here for.

I must have made an impression then, right? I hoped it was a good one.

Jax put his hand in the small of my back, offering me more of his comforting touch before we walked through the door. I knew I probably shouldn't have let him lay a hand on me in front of the other staff here, but hey, in a matter of hours, we were probably going to be well and truly wrapped up here once and for all. It didn't matter what our relationship was after that, right?

I paused outside the meeting room and put my hand on the door, pulling all my courage together before I pushed it open. I had already decided I could take on anything that they threw at me in there, and I had to remind myself they weren't doing this to try and trip me up. They wanted me to succeed and I was grateful for that support.

"Hey," I greeted the three of them, smiling around the table. "It's great to see you all. Thanks for meeting with us today."

We went through the usual formal greetings, and Jax and I set up for our presentation. He was manning the slideshow that would detail how we were

going to make this all work, and I would be doing most of the talking, though he had assured me he would jump in when he needed to if he saw me struggling.

“My glamorous assistant Jax will be running the slideshow,” I joked, and the three of them laughed. I could already feel the tension lifting from my shoulders as I cracked a couple more jokes, and I hoped they couldn’t tell how nervous I had been when I had walked in here.

“Okay, so we’ve conducted some market research into the groups that will be best suited for the focus of this campaign, and this is what we’ve come up with,” I began, the words slid easily from my lips because I had practiced them so many times over.

I slipped over my words once or twice, but they didn’t seem to notice it. I was sure I was more worried about how this was going to go than they were, and I didn’t need to panic or anything. The main thing was keeping my head and making sure I hit all the major points Jax and I had discussed, and I was sure I was going to be able to make that happen.

As we moved on to the graphics we’d had mocked up for the potential logo for this campaign, I felt myself stumble slightly.

“Uh, and as you can see...” I trailed off as I turned to look back at the image, attempting to recall what it was I was trying to get them to see here. I stared at the screen for a second, a deafening silence ringing in my ears, but Jax jumped in before it could go on for too long.

“If you don’t mind me upgrading my glamorous assistant duties,” he said to me, drawing another chuckle from the executives.

“This design was one we went with because of how well it fits into the aesthetics of some of the major social media brands right now,” he explained, and I stepped back and let him fill in the blanks for me.

Catching my breath, I inhaled deeply and pulled myself back down to Earth. No need to panic. I was doing fine here. I could tell from the way they were listening to me. There were no glances in between themselves, as though they were making sure they had heard what I was saying right. No, they were just taking what I was saying at face value, trusting I knew what I was talking about, and I needed to trust in it, too.

Soon enough, we had managed to finish up the presentation. It was over—actually over. I breathed a sigh of relief as we clicked off the slideshow, and Jax and I exchanged a secret little smile, silently congratulating one another on how it had gone. All that stress, all that tension, and now, it was

finally behind me.

Ian gestured for us both to sit down, and he turned to his colleagues on either side of him. Both of them seemed excited at the ideas we had just put forward, as I had always known they would be. I had allowed my nerves to get the better of me for a hot second there, but they were behind me now and I wasn't going to let anything get in the way of the triumph I felt right now.

"This looks fantastic," Ian told us, beaming as though he couldn't believe how well this had gone. "I love everything you've put forward here. It makes perfect sense for the audience we're trying to reach for. And I love your ideas for how to approach the Greek market, too. I know that's going to be more of a challenge, but I'm sure we can find a way to make it work."

"I'm sure you will," Jax replied.

"Or perhaps the two of you could?" he said, raising his eyebrows.

"How do you mean?" I asked.

"Well, it's clear the two of you work very well together," he pointed out. "Having both of you on this Greek campaign would make a huge difference, since the two of you have been out there and you have the hands-on, practical experience to make it work."

"Wow, that's an amazing offer," I blurted out before I could stop myself. They had already offered me a position here, but the thought of getting Jax to stick around and work with me on it too? Yeah, that would be a dream come true, and I loved the thought of it.

"I think that's something we'd need to discuss between ourselves before we make any major decisions," Jax replied, and I nodded. He was right. It wasn't something I could just accept on his behalf. The two of us needed to come to the conclusion together, even if accepting it seemed like the right choice right now.

We said our goodbyes, and I managed to keep it together until I stepped out of the office—where I punched the air and did a victory spin, wishing I could burst into song right there in the street.

"Okay, I think that went well!" I told him as I took his hand happily. "If they offered us a job, that means they liked what they saw, didn't they?"

"I think it's safe to say that," he agreed, chuckling as he looked down at me. "You did an amazing job in there. I knew you would."

"Yeah, I think so," I replied. I was playing at being modest, but honestly, I wanted to swagger down this whole street and make sure everyone saw just how much ass I had kicked in there.

“And what do you think about the job?” I asked him excitedly. I loved the idea of us working together again, but I knew he had his own business to take care of, and I didn’t want to assume he would be willing to take a step back from that. He probably had plenty to work on back there, and he might not have time for another project at KICKS.

“I think we should take some time to think about it before we make any quick decisions,” he replied. “What if something else comes up? You don’t want to commit to anything until you’ve seen exactly what else is out there for you.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course,” I agreed. I was still buzzing from how well it had gone in there. He could have said anything to me, and I would have agreed. I just didn’t want anything to shatter this sweet feeling of success, the sensation that I had actually managed to pull all of this off.

“Anyway, you probably need to talk to your boss, right?” he said, and I slapped my hand to my forehead.

“Shit, I almost forgot about Susan,” I muttered. I had promised to let her know how today went. She was still my employer, after all, and she deserved to know what I had been getting up to. I had hoped to get KICKS as a client for her, but the more time that passed, the more it looked like I was just going to jump ship and work for them. Maybe I should have felt guilty about it, but hey, I was making room for someone else to work for Susan and learn from her expertise. That had to count for something, right?

It was hard to care about any of that when I knew I had just managed to nail that meeting. I walked Jax back to his car but declined the ride he offered me to my office.

“I think I want to walk,” I told him. “Enjoy the fresh air, you know?”

“No problem,” he replied, grinning down at me. He planted a sweet kiss on my cheek, a little celebration of how well we had done today.

But for now, I wanted to focus on myself and the fact I had pulled off that meeting. I had been worried about what came next, but if Jax and I had the chance to work together, maybe there was no reason for me to sweat it.

Maybe this was all going to work out, after all.

CHAPTER 65



JAX

“Drinks are on you tonight, right, buddy?” Max asked as he slapped me on the shoulder while we stepped into the bar.

“I thought you guys should be getting drinks for *me*,” I protested. “I’m the one who just finished that contract.”

“Yeah, which means you need to get our drinks to make up for being out of the office for so long,” Derrick teased me.

We made our way over to our usual table. All the guys were with me, insisting on taking this chance to celebrate my win, and honestly, I didn’t care if I had to pay for their drinks. I was glad to be able to share this victory with them.

Morgan had gone back to her place to chill for the night, and I wasn’t going to hassle her to come out with me. I knew she needed time to unwind after how hard she had been working, and besides, she probably needed the space to figure out if she wanted to take the job they had offered to both of us. I had been turning it over and over in my head, and I knew I needed to talk to the guys about it before I made any major decisions one way or another.

“So, you pulled it off,” Spencer told me as we got our first round of drinks back to the table. “They didn’t sniff you out as a total fraud?”

“Seems like I got away with it,” I joked before I took a sip of my beer. “They didn’t figure me out yet. Guess I just have to throw all of you guys under the bus, huh?”

“Guess you do,” Seb agreed, and they started to interrogate me about how the meeting had gone. They might have goofed off and pretended they had just gotten me out here to buy them drinks, but I knew it wasn’t as simple as

that. They were still businessmen under all the bluster, and they wanted to make sure I had represented the brand as well as I could. Everything I did outside of the office was important, and every little detail I let anyone else see was vital to the continued success of the company we had built together.

But there was one detail I still hadn't shared with them, one I wasn't sure how I was supposed to tell them about—the fact they had offered me a job. I knew I couldn't take it, of course, not without losing out on this business we ran together, but there was a part of me that liked the idea of working with Morgan long term. She certainly seemed interested, and I knew we had great chemistry when it came to our business ideas. In any other situation, I would have jumped at the chance to keep what we had going, but I didn't want to let these guys down, either.

"There's actually something else," I admitted after I had finished up my recounting of the meeting. "When the meeting was done, they—"

I hesitated. Max cocked an eyebrow.

"Come on, out with it, Jax," he told me. "We need to know every detail."

"They offered me and Morgan a long-term position there," I explained. "Running another campaign."

"You're not thinking of jumping ship, are you?" Seb asked, looking surprised.

"No, but—"

"Boo!" Graham exclaimed, cutting me off before I could go any further.

The guys tossed napkins at me from around the table, and I had to lift my hands against the onslaught.

Well, that put that to rest. No way were they going to let me walk out of the business and start working for someone else, even if I was going to be able to stick it out with Morgan in the process.

Once the first round was finished, Derrick offered to give me a hand transporting the next one back to the table, and the two of us headed over to the bar together.

"Are you really thinking of taking the job with KICKS?" he asked me as soon as we were out of earshot of the table.

"I'm not going to just turn my back on you guys," I told him, shaking my head. "I just like the idea of working with Morgan. We work well together. And I want to spend as much time with her as I can."

"I get it, I get it," Derrick replied. "Trust me. And I think there might actually be a way you can—"

He was interrupted by the bartender taking our order, but my interest was instantly piqued when I heard him talking about the possibility of something to do with this job. It should have told me everything I needed to know, really, that I was so willing to jump on any chance I could get to work this new campaign with Morgan. Work had been what had gotten in the way of our relationship in the first place, after all, and if there was a way for me to make sure it never would again, I would take it.

Once the bartender had our order, Derrick turned back to me.

“So why do you want to take the job there?” he asked. “Is it just about her?”

“It’s about her,” I admitted. “But I think I could really thrive at this brand, too. They’ve already been really pleased with the work we’ve done for them, and if I stick it out, I’m pretty sure we could take it to the next level. I haven’t worked with a brand that’s so up-and-coming like this, and I kind of want to ride that wave, see where it takes me, you know?”

“See where it takes you with her,” he added, and I nodded.

“Hey, I’m not going to deny it,” I replied, holding my hands up. “I love working with her. It’s this job that brought us back together. I don’t want to walk away from it.”

“You think she’s going to take the job there?”

“I think she wants to,” I admitted. “I’m not sure if she’s set on it yet, but I can’t see her turning this down.”

“Right,” Derrick agreed, and he glanced back over at the table, as though making sure none of them were listening in. He lowered his voice and shifted a little closer to me. “I’ve been thinking about it since you brought it up, and I think there might actually be a way for you to have your cake and eat it too.”

“How do you mean?”

“In terms of working with Morgan but not walking away from the company here,” he told me.

I raised my eyebrows. “I’m listening,” I replied, feeling a punch of excitement in my chest. Maybe it was too crazy for me to hope that I could pull this off, but I wanted some way to make both happen. I didn’t want to leave what I had worked so hard for with the guys, but the thought of working with Morgan was way too enticing for me to give up, especially when our first project together had gone so well.

But just as Derrick opened his mouth to continue, a shout came over from

the table behind us.

“Hey, the service here is terrible!” Max joked as he waved over at us. “You guys ever going to bring us our drinks?”

I sighed. I knew we couldn’t continue this conversation without them noticing it might be about something we didn’t want them to know about, and I had no intention of letting them see how badly I wished I could go work with Morgan.

Derrick nodded to me, as though he knew as well as I did that we weren’t going to get away with this clandestine conversation any longer.

“Hold that thought,” I told him as I started gathering the drinks. “I’m going to try and sate that pack of wild beasts.”

“Yeah, good luck with that.” He laughed, but my mind was racing as I tried to figure out what he might have had in mind to make all of this work. If he had some way he could assure me that I could be with Morgan, without losing out on the trust and work I’d put in with the guys, I would have taken it in an instant, no doubt about it.

Slowly but surely, it felt like everything was starting to come together the way I had always hoped it would, ever since Morgan and I had ended up working together again. If Derrick was onto something here, it could change everything.

And, right now, I felt like I would have done anything to make both pieces of my life fit together the way I wanted them to.

CHAPTER 66



MORGAN

“Morgan, do you have a minute?”

I looked up from my desk to see Susan leaning in the doorway to her office, eyebrows raised expectantly. I nodded, getting to my feet and closing out of the tab I had been working on—a report I was filling out covering how the meeting with KICKS had gone and how the project had unfolded in general.

It had been strange being back at my regular office like this but also something of a relief too. I was glad to be spending some time back in the comfortable reality I was used to, even if it seemed like it belonged to a different world right now. I had spent so long at the KICKS office I had almost forgotten I had a full-time job somewhere else.

But Susan had been such a support to me in all the time I had worked for her, and there was no way I was going to go and forget that now. No, she deserved my support, my focus, and I was going to give that to her, even if I was thinking about accepting an offer from another company right now.

I stepped into her office, and she grinned and gestured for me to take a seat.

“It’s great to have you back in the office again, Morgan,” she told me. “And I know I’m your boss, but I’d just like to say on a personal note how proud I am of you for pulling off this KICKS contract. I know it must have been intimidating, taking on something as big as that, but you never let that get to you. I admire that.”

“Thank you,” I replied, nodding and smiling. Honestly, I doubted I would have been able to do it if she hadn’t put all her support behind me, and I was sure she was aware of what an impact she had had on my ability to not just

take on, but actually succeed, at something so challenging.

“I know you’re getting settled back in here, but there’s something I wanted to discuss with you,” she explained, leaning forward and raising her eyebrows. “And that’s the possibility of you becoming a partner here at the firm.”

My lips parted in shock. No way! I had never imagined I would get so many opportunities landing in my lap all at once, but here she was, telling me she wanted me here long term—as her equal, no less. This was crazy.

“You mean it?” I blurted out, as though I really thought this might have been some cruel joke on her part.

She chuckled. “Yes, I mean it, Morgan. I’ve been really impressed with how hard you’ve worked, the effort you’ve put in here. I know there are plenty of companies that would want to snap up an employee like you, and I’m not going to let them get you without putting an offer on the table first.”

I leaned back in my seat, stunned, as I tried to take it all in. I couldn’t believe it. After all this time working for her, it felt like everything was coming together. Maybe I really was good enough to have earned all this attention and all of these offers. Maybe all my hard work was really coming together the way I had always dreamed it would.

And maybe Jax had been the conduit to make it all happen. All this time, ever since we had split, I had convinced myself I couldn’t have that relationship with him while I succeeded at work, but it was all falling into place, everything clicking and making sense. I could have both. I could have it all. Everything I had always wanted.

“I have the papers drawn up and ready for you to look over, if you’d like to take them with you today,” Susan told me, and I nodded, my head spinning as I took in everything she was saying to me.

This place had been such an amazing jumping-off point for me and the work I wanted to do, but was it where I was going to thrive most in the future? I wasn’t sure. I wasn’t sure and I didn’t know exactly how I was supposed to make sure of it.

“Thank you, I’d love that,” I replied.

She pulled out the papers and slid them toward me. I looked down at them, wondering where to start. This was a good offer, a damn good offer, but there were others on the table right now. I had options, and I wasn’t going to jump into anything until I was sure what the right one was.

“You take this away, take your time,” Susan told me, seeming to read my

mind, able to figure out what was going on inside my head.

I wondered if I should tell her about the other offers that were sitting in front of me right now, but I decided against it. I didn't want her to think I was flaking out on her, willing to snap up another offer as soon as it came along. I didn't have one foot out the door here, and I would never have wanted her to think that way.

"Thank you," I murmured, and I tucked it into my bag carefully, like they were precious cargo.

I said my farewell and headed back to my desk to gather my stuff before I went home. I needed to talk to someone about this, someone outside of all this work stuff, so I gave Haley a text and asked her if I could come over to talk. She replied at once, telling me to get my ass down there so she could chat with me, and I headed over to her place right after work.

"There you are!" she exclaimed as soon as she opened the door. "I thought something had gone horribly wrong with your meeting or something," she told me, shaking her head. She gestured for me to come in and poured me a glass of wine before I'd even managed to get a word in edgewise.

"What do you mean?" I laughed.

"You were so worried about it when I saw you last, and then I didn't hear anything," she pointed out. "I figured you'd probably jumped into the river because you stumbled over your words or something."

"Hey, I might be crazy, but I'm not quite that crazy yet," I protested as she handed me the glass of wine.

"So, am I to assume that it all went okay, then?" she asked me.

I nodded. "It did. It's gone really well, actually. They offered me a job there, working with Jax on their next campaign."

"Oh, really?" she exclaimed, her eyes widening. "Damn, you must really have nailed it then!"

"I guess so," I replied, a little smile on my lips.

"And you get to work with him now," she added. "That's what you were worried about, right? Not getting to work with him in the future?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm kind of worried about, I guess," I admitted, and she frowned.

"Why so?" she asked. "Does he not want to do it or something?"

"He wants to think about it, which is fine," I replied. "But I just got another offer—from Susan, the woman I'm working for now. She wants me

to become a partner at the firm.”

Haley’s eyes nearly bugged out of her head when I told her that part.

“Holy hell, Morgan, that’s amazing!” she exclaimed. “A partner? That’s huge!”

“Yeah, it is,” I agreed as I sank down onto the couch. “But I’m not sure which offer I would be better off taking.”

“Hmmm,” she murmured, tapping her finger on her chin pensively as she considered the options I had been given. “Yeah, that’s a tough one. Which one do you think you’re leaning toward, overall?”

“I honestly don’t have a clue,” I confessed. “I kind of wish Susan hadn’t made this offer to me. It feels like my head’s turning inside out. I just... I’m not sure which one makes more sense in the long run.”

“Yeah, I don’t know which one I would go for,” she replied. “I mean, on the one hand, you get to be a partner at a company, and on the other, you get to work for this cool brand and potentially with the guy you’re dating. It’s a tough call.”

“Hey, I came here for advice,” I protested, laughing. “You’re not meant to get as confused as me about all of this, okay?”

“Sorry, sorry.” She laughed. “Let me grab my wine.”

We discussed the details exhaustively, until it felt like I had approached these new offers from every angle I could. I didn’t even know where to start. It felt like there was too much for me to take in, and yet, I knew I would have to step up and do what needed to be done soon. I had to make a decision about what my future was going to look like. I didn’t want to throw away these chances just because I was too nervous about making the wrong choice.

“The only wrong choice you can actually make is if you don’t take these chances,” Haley pointed out to me, and I nodded in agreement. I knew she was right, and I knew I needed to come up with an answer for all of this sooner rather than later. These offers wouldn’t keep sitting on the table for me forever, and I didn’t want to let any of them slip through my fingers.

“I need to talk to Jax about this,” I said with a sigh. It was the only way I could have all the information to come to the right conclusion. I wanted to know if he was going to take this job with me because the thought of us working together made everything fall into place. I would take whatever position was put in front of me if it meant the two of us could be in on it together, just like we had for the KICKS project. We had kicked major ass there, and we could do it again. I just needed to find some way to make sure

he saw that, too.

“You should,” Haley agreed, and I finished up the last of my wine and got to my feet.

“I’m going to go down there now,” I told her, pulling together all my resolve. I wasn’t even sure what I was nervous about, not really, but there was still a tingle at the back of my head that told me it might not be an easy conversation.

“You let me know how it goes, okay?” Haley told me as she walked me to the door. “I’m way too invested in this saga now. I’ve got to know how it turns out.”

“I will,” I promised her, and I gave her a quick hug. “Thanks for talking this all out with me. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Probably drink a lot less wine,” she joked, but she hugged me back. And with that, I headed out the door and hoped that by the time I arrived back at my place, I would have an answer for what was going on inside my head, for the mess that seemed to be pulling me in a million different directions at once. I needed to figure out where I was going in life.

Especially if where I was going happened to include the man I loved.

CHAPTER 67



JAX

As I finished up my workout, I realized my phone was buzzing where I had left it on the gym mat beside me. I grabbed it and, catching my breath, lifted it to my ear.

“Hey, it’s Jax,” I greeted whoever was on the other end of the line. I was sweating hard, but it was just what I’d wanted when I had come out to the gym in the first place, to blow off some steam and try to clear some of the fog that had been hanging on to my brain since the offer from KICKS had been laid out on the table. I still didn’t know what I wanted to do about it, and I needed to come up with some kind of response, and soon.

“Hey, Jax, it’s Derrick,” he greeted me down the line. “We’re at a diner near the office. You want to come down and join us? I think we’ve got some news you’ll want to hear.”

As soon as he said that, my ears pricked up. He had been the one who thought he might be able to get the guys on my side about getting Morgan to be our seventh partner, and, if the tone of his voice was anything to go by, then he might have just been able to pull that off.

I took a quick shower and got dressed before I took off toward the diner, excitement twisting in my stomach. This was the best case scenario for me, if it had gone like I hoped it had. I just wanted to show them that she would be an amazing fit for us, and if they could see the sheer quality of work she would bring to the company, I was sure I could convince them to see it from my perspective.

I arrived at the diner, and there they were—all the guys, the table headed by Derrick. He grinned as soon as he saw me, rising to his feet and giving me a hug like he had good news he couldn’t wait to share.

“Hey, what are you all doing here?” I asked as I slid into the booth next to Max. The guys all looked around the table, as though they were deciding who got to be the one to break the news to me.

“We’ve been doing some talking about what you brought up with Morgan,” Derrick explained, finally breaking the silence. “And we’ve decided—”

“We saw the amount of money she brought in with that KICKS deal,” Seb cut in before he could say another word, his voice bubbling over with excitement. “And it’s impressive. She’s impressive. If she can bring that kind of shit to our company, we’re going to have no reason not to hire her.”

My eyes widened, and I felt a punch of excitement. This was it, what I had been waiting for all this time, for them to see that she was a seriously good prospect and that they would be smart to jump on the chance to have her working for us. And hey, if it was something as cynical as the money she brought in that had turned the tables for them, I wasn’t going to complain. Anything to get them to see it from my perspective, to get them to see her for the amazing businesswoman that she always had been.

“We’ve been doing some talking based on what we saw from the intakes from the KICKS contract,” Derrick explained, putting it in slightly more professional terms. “And suffice it to say that we’re really impressed with the kind of profit she can turn. She’ll more than cover her own salary if she can match that income, and no doubt she’ll be even better working with us and having access to more lucrative deals in the process.”

My head was spinning as I took it all in. “So you want to take her on as another partner?” I asked, confirming what I was sure they had already told me.

Max laughed. “Yes, asshole, that’s exactly what we’re saying. She’s going to be the seventh partner, as long as she accepts this offer. And with the package we’re putting together for her, I doubt she’s going to turn it down.”

“And you’d know all about the package you’re offering her, right, Jax?” Graham teased me, and the whole table exploded in laughter. I didn’t even have it in me to tell him off for being so crude, not when they had just handed me the one thing I wanted more than anything in the world.

I couldn’t wait to see the look on her face when I told her what they had just shared with me. I knew she had been dreaming of a high-level position like this one for years now, and I was going to be the one to gift it to her. The thought of that was downright thrilling to me, and I almost sprang up from

the table to rush over to her place and tell her on the spot.

But I wanted to talk details with the guys for just a little bit longer and make sure we had everything ready to go so I could just take this to her with all the details fleshed out. And to show them how much I appreciated what they had done for me.

I knew Derrick must have had to do some serious convincing to get them all onboard like this. And not just onboard but seemingly excited about it, too. They were acting like they couldn't wait to make her part of the team, and the thought of being able to have her right there in the office with me made me want to punch the air with excitement.

"You know how much this means to me," I told them as I grinned around the table at them all. "How important this is."

"We're a family, Jax," Derrick reminded me. "What one of us wants, we should all be willing to put in the effort to get it."

The other guys nodded in agreement, and I felt a wash of sureness move through me. These guys had gotten me through so much, supported me in the face of so much over the course of my life, and I was beyond grateful that they were willing to help me through this next part, too. This part that involved her, this part that would take our company to the next level, as well as boosting her career at the same time.

I had a coffee with them, managing to contain my excitement, but I had to get away soon enough. I wanted to talk to her about it, tell her the amazing news.

"I should be getting out of here," I told them.

Max chuckled at me, shaking his head. "You in a rush to go tell Morgan the good news?"

"You got me," I replied, holding my hands up and nodding. "I want to see the look on her face when she finds out what you guys have done for her. She's going to be so happy."

I said my goodbyes and made my way back to my place, and it was as though I was walking on air the whole way there. I couldn't keep the grin off my face as I went down to see her, the thrill of everything that I had to share enough to make me feel as though I might take flight any second. She was going to be so happy. It was what she deserved, after all the work she had put in. I was sure of that. But still, she probably didn't think she was going to be able to get it for a while yet, and I was going to be able to gift her the promise of something bigger than she had now.

When she had split with me the first time, she'd told me it was because she needed to stay focused on her career, but we weren't going to have to worry about that any longer. From this moment on, we could be together, work together, and match up our personal and professional lives. We didn't have a thing to worry about anymore.

I rounded the corner to my apartment, and, to my surprise, there she was, standing outside, leaning up against the door.

"Hey," I greeted. "I was just looking for you."

"Me too," she replied. "There's a lot we need to talk about."

"Damn straight," I agreed, and I couldn't keep the grin off my face as I unlocked the door and gestured for her to go in. She had no idea how good this was going to be. And I could hardly wait to see the look on her face when I hit her with the news I was sitting on right now.

CHAPTER 68



MORGAN

He made me a coffee as I sat on the couch, staring out the window and wondering where we were meant to begin with all of this. I couldn't wait to share what Susan had offered to me. I still felt like I was on a high from finding out she wanted me for something as big as a partner position. After working for her for so long, it felt like I was finally breaking through and into something bigger, but I needed to talk to him before I decided which way I wanted to go on this.

He handed me a coffee, and, from the look on his face, I could tell there was something he wanted to share. I cocked an eyebrow at him with interest.

"What's on your mind?"

"You first," he told me, gesturing for me to fill him in.

I took a deep breath and told him everything about the deal I had just been offered with Susan. It still felt a little surreal, as though it couldn't have really been happening to me, but I knew it was what I deserved after putting in so much work for her, pushing as hard as I had to make sure I achieved on a level I wanted to achieve at. A partner position was huge, but was it the right choice, with the KICKS deal on the table as well?

"I know it sounds good, but I really like the idea of working with you at KICKS again too," I explained to him, once I had caught him up. I bit my lip and smiled.

"It's all just so much," I added, shaking my head. "I mean, I'm proud that I got these offers in the first place. I never thought I would be able to do something like this, but at the same time, what do I pick? What's the best choice for my career long term?"

And for us, I thought, though I didn't add that part. It was confusing

enough without throwing the two of us into the mix. He leaned back on the couch, spread his arms over the back, and grinned at me.

“I think I might have the answer,” he replied.

I raised my eyebrows at him. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” he said, and he flicked his tongue over his lips like he was savoring the thought of it. “I have an offer to make you.”

“You do?” I replied, frowning with confusion. He nodded.

“I’ve been doing some talking with the guys at the office,” he explained. “And they’ve agreed that they want to bring you onboard as a seventh partner.”

“They what?” I exclaimed, utterly baffled by what he was saying to me.

He chuckled. “I know, I know, I should have told you about it sooner,” he replied. “But I wanted to make sure I had it in the bag before I spoke to you about it. And now I do. They saw the money you brought in with the KICKS deal, and they can finally see how much sense it would make to have you onboard.”

“Jax, what are you talking about?” I asked him. Was this his idea of a joke or something? I didn’t know what the hell he was trying to get at here, but my brain couldn’t make sense of it. Why would he throw another offer on the table when I was already having such a hard time figuring out what I wanted to do? This just piled on another stressor, another thing I had to worry about, as though I didn’t have enough going on already.

“Trust me, the pay and benefits package is impressive, but we can talk about all the details later,” he went on. “And I promise there won’t be a uniform stipulation. Well, maybe when I get you alone. Your birthday suit in the evenings, how about that?”

He kept talking, and I was doing my best to keep up with it all, but my head was spinning with confusion as I tried to piece it all together. He wanted to make me a partner at his company? It sounded like he had been working on this for a while, fitting together all the pieces behind my back. Why hadn’t he talked to me about this? Didn’t I deserve to know what was going on with him, what he was planning for me? I already had so many offers to choose from, and this one just made it all the more confusing, all the harder for me to figure out.

He seemed to notice I was a little quieter than usual, and he cocked his head to the side, clearly confused.

“Something bothering you?” he asked, and I nodded. I didn’t want to

seem ungrateful, but at the same time, did he really think I needed him to make these kinds of decisions for me? Didn't he think I was capable of getting what I wanted from my career without him forcing his way in and guiding the direction of it?

"You really did all of this without asking me?" I demanded, my voice a little harsher than it needed to be.

He looked totally confused, as though this was the very last reaction he had expected from me. "Yeah, well, I didn't want to say anything until I knew we had a firm offer," he replied. "Didn't want to get your hopes up."

"We're meant to work on stuff together," I reminded him. "This isn't exactly—I mean, you didn't even talk to me about it. What if I don't want this?"

"What do you mean?" he asked, and he sounded utterly baffled. All the cocky bravado that had been on his face when he had been telling me about this offer seemed to fade away all at once, as though he couldn't believe I wasn't throwing myself at his feet with gratefulness for what he was doing for me.

"I mean, I have enough on my plate right now as it is," I pointed out. "I don't need another offer clogging up my brain."

"Why would you need the other offers after this, though?" he pointed out. "This is a best case scenario. The pay's good, it's a step up from where you're working now, and—"

"No, I get to decide that," I told him, cutting him off. He stopped dead in his tracks, clamping his mouth shut, his jaw tight. I could see he was confused right now, but more than that, he was pissed—probably pissed that I was turning him down when he had just given me an offer that so many other people would have jumped at the chance to take. But I wasn't going to let him dictate the rest of my career like that.

"Morgan, this is a good offer," he replied, speaking slower, like he wasn't sure I had taken it all in. "I know I should have talked to you about it before now, but this is a deal you don't want to turn down."

I lifted my hand and glanced away from him. I knew he was just trying to help, and I didn't want to seem ungrateful for all he was doing for me, but couldn't he see how insulting this was? I had worked so hard on my own terms to get where I wanted to go, only for him to come along and basically tell me he had an offer I couldn't refuse. It didn't work that way. It never had.

"I came over here because I wanted to talk about our future, not because I

needed you to fix my career for me,” I told him, my voice quiet. I didn’t want to hurt his feelings, but a mess of emotions were rising up in me right now, and I could feel them threatening to get the better of me.

“Yeah, and I’m telling you I have an offer that’s going to fix that for you,” he replied, furrowing his brow. “What’s the problem?”

“The problem is that I’ve worked my whole career to get where I want to go, and I don’t want anyone else telling me where I should be headed,” I replied. “Even you.”

He sat upright. His face clouded.

“This wasn’t what I was looking for from you today,” I explained. “I wanted to talk to you. I wanted to bounce some ideas off of you. I wanted advice. I didn’t want you to just come in here and tell me that you’ve pretty much decided how the rest of my career is going to go because you’ve got an offer that’s going to make all the rest of them look worthless.”

“That’s not what I was trying to do at all,” he protested, and I shook my head.

“That’s what it feels like,” I muttered to him.

He slumped down on the couch. “I thought this was what you wanted,” he told me. “You get a step up in your career, and I—”

“No, I wanted to get that myself,” I told him. “I know it might seem crazy to you, but I wanted to do this all on my own terms, alright? I didn’t want someone else to come in here and do it for me. That goes against everything I’ve been working for all this time.”

He stared at me for a long moment. I could feel the confusion coming off him in waves, but he was covering it up with his irritation, irritation that I wasn’t just taking this offer he clearly thought blew all the others out of the water.

“I needed you to talk to me today, not come up with a new offer to make things even more confusing,” I added, and I got to my feet.

“Where are you going?” he demanded.

“I need to get some headspace,” I told him, and I picked up my bag and hooked it over my shoulder. I probably should have stayed to talk this out with him, but with yet another deal on the table, I had to take some space to think. I needed room to figure out how I was supposed to go forward, what made the most sense and what would actually serve me the best in the long run. I could see from the look on his face he would have done anything to make me stay, but I wasn’t in the mood for it right now.

I headed for the door, and he planted a hand on it, trying to stop me.

“We can talk about this,” he protested, but I shook my head.

“I think it’s better if I just go for now,” I replied, and I couldn’t even look at him. He eyed me for a moment, then lifted his hand from the door.

“Fine, go,” he replied. “This offer’s still going to be here when you see that it’s the best thing for you.”

I didn’t reply. Pushing the door open, I stepped out into the hallway and gulped in a big lungful of fresh air as I tried to ground myself once more.

What the hell had just happened? Was I the one being unfair right now? Maybe I should have turned around and told him I appreciated how far he had gone for me, the work he had done for me, and accepted what he had laid out for me.

But I knew it wasn’t that easy. I had to do this all on my own terms, and I couldn’t let myself get drawn in by the promises he was making. I had worked this whole career under my own steam, and I wasn’t going to forget about it now, not when I had one of the biggest choices to make right there in front of me.

This was it. Make or break time. And I had to pray I found a way to make it.

CHAPTER 69



JAX

I took another sip of my scotch and stared out of the window, brooding on what the hell had just happened—and how the hell I could find a way to make it right.

I felt like I was taking crazy pills. How could Morgan turn this around on me like I had been the one to do something wrong? Surely, she had to see how insane that was, right? I had offered her a huge opportunity, bigger than either of the other offers she had on the table, and she had stormed out of here like I had just told her to quit her job so she could churn out a bunch of kids for me, barefoot and pregnant in the kitchen.

I had been trying to help her. Why couldn't she see that? Yeah, she had a lot of offers to consider right now, but surely she could see that the one I had laid out in front of her made the most sense, right? She wasn't crazy. The money was good, the career experience would be major, and she would boost herself up the business ladder into a top position at a company that had some serious sway in this city. So why had she acted like I had insulted her by putting it out on the table at all?

I had expected her to thank me and accept the deal on the spot, but now, I was in this apartment alone, trying to figure out how I could get her back here—and what I could say to make her see how good this would be for her. The way she had reacted, it was the last thing I had been prepared for, and it had knocked me on my ass. My head was still spinning as I tried to make sense of it, and I hated that feeling of being out of control, of knowing I didn't have a final say in how all of this went.

I had texted Derrick and asked him to come over, figuring he might be able to see the sense in this even if I couldn't. He had been able to get the

guys onboard with all of this, and perhaps he could find an approach that would let me do the same with her, even if I didn't have a damn clue what it was going to look like.

I heard a buzz at the door, and I pressed the button to let him in. Derrick had a bottle of scotch in one hand and a concerned look on his face.

"Something happened?" he asked, and I nodded.

"She walked out on me when I told her about the offer," I explained to him, gesturing to the spot she had been sitting before she had left.

He raised his eyebrows. "Shit, that's not ideal."

"Tell me about it." I sighed. "Here, let me get you a glass for that."

I filled him in on everything that had happened as he poured himself a drink, and he listened with interest, taking it all in as though he couldn't quite believe it. But, as I spoke, his face started to clear, like it was all falling into place for him.

"What the hell happened?" I asked him, shaking my head. "I feel like this is an offer she couldn't refuse, but she acted like I had just fired her from a job when I told her about it."

"Maybe it's just too much, too soon," he suggested.

"How do you mean?"

"She's already got these other offers on the table, and she's having a hard enough time picking between them," he pointed out. "I could see why laying out another one made it hard for her to think straight."

"Yeah, but she has to be able to see that this is the best option for her, right?" I pointed out. "It's got the best pay, it's with the best company, and it lets us work together. Why wouldn't she want to take it?"

"Maybe she wasn't looking for a solution when she came to you," he replied. "Could just be that she was hoping for a listening ear. Someone who could just hear her out and let her bounce around some ideas instead of giving her an answer."

I sighed. Maybe he was right, but I didn't get that. Surely, this would have made it simpler for her, right? She wouldn't have to worry about the choice she should make because I had given her an answer that would solve it for her. She didn't need to go back and forth over the choices she needed to weigh up, there was an obvious winner here.

"But why would she just walk out?" I asked.

Derrick paused for a moment, as though not sure he should really say what was on his mind next.

“I guess it’s not the first time she’s done it,” he pointed out.

I bristled. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean,” he replied, raising his eyebrows at me. “You said it yourself, she left before when the two of you were younger because she put her own career and success over you. What if she’s doing the same thing again?”

“But it’s different,” I protested. “I can give her the career she’s always wanted. I can make it happen for her. She’s not going to leave again with that on the table.”

But even as I trailed off, my mind was racing. Was that what this was about? She wanted to achieve on her own, and she didn’t want me to hand it to her? I didn’t see it that way, not when I knew all the work I had done behind the scenes to make sure I could get her onboard, but she hadn’t seen that part.

Maybe if she had, she would have been able to understand that this was more than just me handing her a job on a silver platter. They had seen how hard she had worked, how much profit she could turn, and how far she could go, and that was why they had decided they wanted her on the team. Maybe if I had led with that, it wouldn’t have turned into such a mess, but it was too late for it now. She would likely think I was just reeling it back to try and get her to go along with my idea, when I actually thought she would be an amazing addition to our office.

“She’s not walking out on me again,” I told him. “This isn’t the same as last time. She has so many offers on the table. She’s just having a hard time sorting through all of them, that’s all.”

“The guys aren’t going to be impressed if she turns them down after all the work you put in to try and convince them to get her onboard,” he said, and I rubbed a hand over my face.

“I know, I know,” I muttered. I hated having to tell him about this, given that he had been the one to get her in the door in the first place. After everything he had done, for her to turn her back on it because I had failed to frame it right must have felt like a slap in the face. I wished I could go back in time and change it, change the way I phrased it to her, but it was too late for that now.

Derrick and I talked it over again, and I ran through the conversation I had with her. He agreed that I might have come off as a little cocky, and I cursed inwardly at the thought of it. I should have been more careful. I should

have taken some more time to think about how I was going to pitch this to her. She had so many offers right now, and it was no wonder she had wound up confused about which the best one to take happened to be.

I sipped on my scotch and wondered where she was right now, what she was doing. I wished I could go to her and tell her that I was sorry for the way I had acted, that I saw it from her point of view now and that I wouldn't try to push her to make a choice.

But at the same time, Derrick was right. If she decided to turn this down, I was going to look like an asshole in front of all the guys I worked with for trying to get them on my side for so long only to have her turn it down when I finally got there. It was a lose-lose situation, and I wasn't sure how I was meant to navigate it.

I couldn't lose her because of this, though. I couldn't let history repeat itself, not when we were getting so close, not when things had been going as well as they had. I had finally gotten her back after all these years, and I would have done anything I could to make sure nothing got in the way of that. I would have turned this world upside down if that was the way she wanted it, I didn't care.

"You should talk to her, man," Derrick told me. "See if you can work this out. You really like her, don't you?"

"I love her," I replied before I could stop myself. The words surprised me, even as they came out of my mouth. I knew they were true, but I hadn't said them to anyone out loud yet.

"Then you need to do something about this," he urged me. "Go to her. Talk to her. Let her talk your damn ear off if you have to, show her that you're willing to listen and take in everything she needs you to know."

"You're right," I agreed. I didn't know if I should get out there and do it tonight, but I was willing to try, willing to say whatever it took, spend hours listening to her talk if it meant she could see how serious I was about this.

Derrick took his leave, and I moved to the window, looking down over the city. She was out there somewhere. I hoped she was thinking about me, thinking about the offer I had made her, even if I hadn't been the smartest about the way I had gone about it.

But I loved her. I did. And I wanted the best for her, in any way I could give it to her. I wanted to make sure she had everything she deserved. She had worked so hard her entire life, which was the reason I was so sure she would be able to take on this position and totally kill it. I knew it might have

felt like I was just pushing her to take the position because it meant we would be working together, but it was a natural next step to her career, and if she could just get on the same page as me, everything would be perfect.

As much as I wanted to run to her right now, I knew she needed time. Space. That was what she had told me, space to think, space to go over everything that was happening in her head and to figure out what she wanted.

And I just had to hope it ran in line with what I wanted for her, too. Because I didn't want this to get in the way of the amazing new relationship we had been building—even if, right now, it was starting to feel a little too familiar for my liking.

A little too close to how it had been when she had broken up with me the first time.

CHAPTER 70



MORGAN

I stared down at the coffee Haley had made for me and wondered how many more times I was going to burden her with my presence before all of this was over and done with.

I just wanted to get to the bottom of this. I wanted to work out how I felt about Jax, about everything we were going through together. I knew he had only been trying to help when he had offered me that position, but he really couldn't see why it had hurt me for him to step in and act like he had all the answers.

I had gone home last night to try and work out what I was feeling, but I hadn't been able to come up with any more answers that would explain what was going on in my head. In some ways, I knew he was right, knew I should have jumped at the chance to take what he was offering me, and yet, at the same time, there was another part of me that wanted to turn down the offer he had laid out for me just on principle. Because he didn't get to decide how my life went. He didn't get to call the shots on all of this. I had worked too hard in my career to get where I was now, and I had never intended to allow a single person to tell me how it was going to turn out, even if they were doing it for good reason, even if I knew they were just trying to support me.

I had come to Haley's this morning and filled her in on everything that had happened the night before. I knew I needed someone to run this by, to see if I was being totally unfair to him. I felt like I was right to have some space to myself, but I needed to hear it from someone else, too, someone who I trusted, someone who I knew would be able to cut through the stress in my head right now and see the obvious truth looking back at me.

"No, I get it," Haley told me as she sat down at her couch opposite me.

“You’ve worked to get everything you wanted in your career, right? It’s only fair you make the call as to where it’s going to go next. I know he’s just trying to help, but he doesn’t get to decide how your life is going to go from here, even if the offer’s good.”

“And it is good,” I sighed. A partnership at a firm as impressive as the one he and his friends ran would be a great step up for me, in terms of salary and in terms of the possibilities of what I could achieve next. There was so much I would be able to do there, so many people I could meet, so many steps forward I could take in terms of my career, and yet?

And yet, I still resented him going out there and getting it for me, which was crazy, wasn’t it? He was just trying to help. Trying to boost up my standing in the world. He thought he was doing the right thing, and I had rounded on him like he had torn up every contract I’d been offered.

“It doesn’t mean you have to take it,” she told me firmly, shaking her head. “Just because it’s good. It’s not going to be good for you if you do take it and find yourself resenting him this whole time, is it?”

“No, you’re right,” I agreed, shaking my head. I wished I could just brush aside the doubts in my mind right now, brush away the questions that were revolving around my brain, but it wasn’t so easy. Even though I should have jumped at the chance to take the offer he had laid in front of me, there were so many cons against the pros column, and I didn’t want to take it until I was sure I had put all of them to rest.

“But job offers are going to come and go,” she continued. “Everything you’ve just been handed right now, you could never have imagined you would get it even a year ago, right?”

“Well, I liked to think I had something like this in my future,” I murmured. But she was right. The enormity of the choices I had been handed were more than I could wrap my head around, and I wasn’t even sure I knew where to start with all of it. Each one had upsides and downsides, but the biggest downside would come if I turned down the offer Jax had made to me. I knew he would be hurt if I brushed it off. I was sure he had done some campaigning to get me into contention, and if I just turned my back on it?

“Of course, and I’m sure there will be other offers like this down the line,” she pointed out. “But you can’t let yourself get hung up on just the ones in front of you, trying to break down the details until it makes sense. You know in your heart which one’s right for you, don’t you?”

I chewed my lip. I wished I did. But my logical brain was getting in the

way of it every time I felt as though I might have been inching closer to an answer. I had never relied on my emotions to make the calls for me. It just seemed too dangerous to go on the basis of what I felt instead of what I thought or knew to be true.

But that was how I had ended up ending things with Jax the last time, because I had been so focused on what I thought I needed rather than what I wanted. I had convinced myself that I couldn't be with someone like him long term, not without it getting in the way of my career.

And I could feel the same doubts stirring in me again. Even if he had this high-flying career now, even if he seemed to have everything in hand, could I really be sure it was going to go the way I wanted it to? If I accepted his offer, what would happen? Would he still treat me as an equal? He had been cracking jokes about the uniform requirements, and they might have been just that, just jokes, but I couldn't help but wonder if that was an indication of how he was going to be when we worked together.

If we worked together.

"I don't know if I do," I told Haley, shaking my head. I hated feeling out of control, as though I wasn't in charge of everything in my life. It drove me crazy. I had worked so hard to try and make sure it wouldn't happen. And now, here I was, with too many offers for me to make sense of and no idea how I was going to make sense of them.

And if I made the wrong choice? How long would it take me to figure it out? I didn't even know if I wanted the answer to that question. The mere thought of turning around a few months down the line and thinking I would have been better off going after something different than what I had chosen to, it made my stomach turn. I hated feeling as though I had missed out, but I was going to have to accept that I couldn't have everything.

"Hey, having too many options is a good kind of problem, though," Haley replied, reaching over to give my knee a squeeze. I tried to offer her a smile, but there was something that stuck in me as I tried to. God, I felt so ungrateful. If I could have gone back in time and told the old version of me that I would be weighing up three separate offers that had been given to me by companies who were all amazing and all seemed to really want me to work for them, I would have been punching the air and celebrating.

And if I'd told her that Jax was one of the people who'd made that offer? What then? How would she have felt? Would she have thought I was insane for letting him anywhere near my life again, let alone my career? I had

broken up with him all those years ago because I had been sure I couldn't have both him and the job trajectory that I wanted, but now, he was offering me a chance to change my career path and chase down something bigger than I could ever have imagined—and do it with him by my side.

I didn't want anyone looking at me and thinking I had slept my way into that position. I knew how people viewed women in this industry, and being handed a job like this one, even if I had earned it with all of my hard work, would be the kind of thing that would draw out those questions.

But did I really want to let people get in the way of what I truly wanted? If it *was* what I truly wanted? God, my head was a mess, and nothing seemed to be able to clear out the questions that were rushing around and around my mind. I felt like I was going to lose it at any second, and I hated how overstuffed my brain was right now.

"I guess so," I replied with a sigh. "I just wish there was some way for me to know what the right one was, you know?"

"You're just going to have to go with your heart," she told me, as though it should have been obvious. And maybe it was. Maybe it should have been. Maybe there was an answer staring me right in the face, and if I had been a little smarter or a little more in touch with my emotions, perhaps I would have been able to figure out what the hell it was already.

But, as it stood, I didn't have a clue, and I could already feel myself going a little insane as I tried to figure it out. I finished up the coffee Haley had made me and slumped back in the seat. I knew I wasn't going to come to any better conclusions down there than I was back at home, and I was sure Haley had better things to do all day than listen to me handwringing about the right choice for my career and my life.

"I should get going," I said as I got to my feet.

"You know you don't have to," she replied, but I shook my head.

"I think it's better that I go over this alone," I replied, offering her a smile. "But thank you. It really helps having someone to bounce ideas off of."

"Sure," she replied. "And you need anything else, you just tell me, okay?"

She pulled me into a tight hug, holding me close and pressing her head into my shoulder for a second. I hugged her back, so glad I had a friend like her who was willing to help me even when I was sure most people would have told me to get my shit together and do what needed to be done.

Whatever that happened to be.

I climbed into my car outside her apartment after I left and sat there for a moment. Maybe I should just drive around for a while, blow off some steam, and hope the obvious choice would make itself known to me as I went, but I knew that wasn't how it worked. I had to be the one in charge here, no matter how tempting it might have been to just throw it all away and go back to what I knew.

Even if it felt like what I knew had been pulled out from underneath me.

CHAPTER 71



JAX

I paced back and forth on the street outside her house, trying to pluck up the courage to knock on the door and go inside. I really should have been ready to talk to her, but I had been turning over the phrases and sentences I needed to say so many times now, I wasn't sure if I could. Wasn't sure if I would be able to come up with the right words to tell her how sorry I was and make sure she knew I saw the error of my ways.

I wanted to make it right, and I was sure the best way to go about it would be to just spill my guts to her. Tell her how I felt, why I had done this, and why I understood the reaction she'd had. It had taken me a hot minute, but talking to Derrick about it had helped clear some of the clouds in my mind, and I could see why she had walked out on me instead of accepting the offer like I was sure she would. I loved the idea of us working together, of course, but I knew how proud she was of all the effort she'd put into her career. Of course she didn't want to just let me trample all over that and show her how things were going to go. She wanted to make her own choices, and I needed her to know that I accepted that, no matter how it might have panned out. If she decided the offer I had for her wasn't the best one, I would just have to suck it up, even if I was sure the guys would give me some major shit for it.

Hey, I could handle some shit from them. Not like I hadn't taken plenty over the years. She was the person I cared about, and I refused to let anything get in the way of it. She was my priority now, and I was willing to do whatever it took to get her to see it.

Her car wasn't outside her place, so I assumed she was out right now, giving me a little more time to work out what I was going to say when it came down to it. Hell, if she even wanted to hear me out. After everything

that had happened, after we'd begun our relationship again, I hoped she would at least be willing to give me a chance here, but I didn't know how she might take all of this. For all I knew, she could turn my ass right around and tell me to leave the moment she saw me, and there wouldn't be a damn thing I could do about it.

I could have given her more time to think it over, but I needed her to hear my piece first, before she made the final call. It just made the most sense to me, and I didn't want to lose out on the chance to make sure she heard everything I needed her to hear. I wanted her to know that I wasn't the guy she had met all those years ago, the guy who had been so sure he knew how everything in life worked and that he would get just what he wanted. I was willing to compromise, to do what I had to if it made her happy. To be a part of a partnership with her and to let both of us achieve on the level we wanted to.

“Jax?”

Her voice had me spinning around on the spot. I had been so lost in thought I hadn't noticed her car pulling up, and now she was standing right there in front of me. Everything I had been planning out seemed to vanish from my mind all at once, and I just looked at her, looked at this beautiful woman in front of me, this woman who knew what she wanted and wasn't afraid to take it.

And I knew I would have done anything in the world to make sure she stayed mine.

“I need to talk to you,” I told her, and she parted her lips in surprise. I thought, for an instant, she was going to turn me away, but then a small smile crept up her lips, and she gestured to the door beside us.

“Let's go upstairs,” she replied, and she led me up to her apartment. The sound of her footsteps on the stairs around us echoed quietly, and they seemed to go in time with the beat of my heart in my chest.

Inside, she gestured for me to grab a seat and then sat down in an armchair opposite me. Taking a deep breath, she spoke first.

“I'm sorry for walking out on you last night,” she began. “I should have ___”

“No, I'm the one who's sorry,” I told her, cutting her off before she could go any further. I wasn't going to let her apologize when I knew I was the one in the wrong here. It just didn't seem fair.

Her eyes widened slightly. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve been doing some thinking,” I explained, flexing my hand in front of me, as I longed to reach out and take hers. I knew I had to keep my hands to myself. I didn’t want to push her into being intimate with me like that, not unless she was totally sure she was ready.

The two of us had been through so much, though, and touching her was like second nature to me. Holding myself back was a deliberate act against my natural instincts.

“And I need to apologize for the way I put all of that onto you yesterday,” I continued. “I should have been more careful about the way I phrased it. I can see now why it’s something that would freak you out. You’ve got all these offers on the table, offers that you’ve worked for, and then I come along and give you another one, one you didn’t even know was a possibility. It’s not fair.”

She stared at me as she waited for me to go on. I couldn’t tell if she agreed with me or if she thought I was crazy. I just had to hope I could get her to see how much I meant this, even if it was more difficult than I had expected it to be.

“And I need you to know, I always respected you and how hard you’ve worked to get where you are,” I told her. “I know there are struggles that you’ve faced as a woman in this line of work that I don’t know anything about, and I can’t even imagine how hard it’s been to push through all of that and come out the other side as the person you are. You have so much to be proud of.”

She smiled, and I could see her cheeks flushing slightly as I spoke. I wondered how often she heard this—how much more I should have been saying it. I wished I could just make her see how deeply I respected her, how much I loved what she did and the career she had carved out for herself.

“And that’s why I wanted to offer you this position,” I continued. “Not because I didn’t think you could get it yourself, or because I thought it was better than what you had earned for yourself, but because I know you’re amazing, and you could bring that to the company. The guys, when they saw how well you had done on the KICKS project, I was pretty sure they would have hired you right there on the spot if they could.”

She giggled slightly. God, it was a relief to hear her laugh.

“But I understand why you reacted the way you did, and I need you to know that I have no issue with you choosing a different path than the partnership position with me,” I explained. “I never want to step on your toes

when it comes to all of this. You deserve so much more than that. I'd love to work with you, but I'll support you no matter what choice you make. No matter what you want to do."

She closed her eyes for a moment and then nodded, as though this was what she had been waiting for me to say to her. When she glanced up at me again, she was smiling, a warm, comfortable smile that filled her whole face with brightness.

"You have no idea how much I wanted to hear you say that," she murmured, and she reached out to take my hand at last.

I pulled her to the couch beside me, slipping an arm around her waist and easing her in even closer. As I looked down at her, at the woman I loved, I could have sworn everything else in the world just vanished for a moment. I couldn't think of anything, see anything but her—the sweetness of her smile, the happiness in her eyes.

"I just want you to be happy in whatever choice you make," I murmured to her. "Because whatever happens, Morgan, I know I'm going to love you. No matter what."

The words slipped out of my lips before I could stop them, and I instantly wanted to take them back, worried they would be too much for her to handle, especially after everything that had happened. But I felt her melt into me, the comfort of her touch reminding me I had made the right call. I had told her I loved her before this, when we had been together the first time, but it was the only time I had told her those precious words since we had gotten back together, and they felt so damn right to me. So damn perfect.

"I love you too, Jax," she murmured to me, and as she gazed at me, I felt all the doubts fall away, all the questions I had been turning over and over in my mind vanishing like they had never been there in the first place. How could any of them matter, or even come close to mattering, when she looked at me the way she did and told me that she loved me? I couldn't think of anything but how much I adored her, how much I wanted her, how I would have done anything to make sure we didn't lose out on each other again. I didn't care what it took. She was mine, and I was hers, and we were together, just like we were always meant to be.

I brushed my thumb over her cheek slowly, grazing it just lightly against her skin, and she drew in a sharp breath at my touch. Even after all this time, the chemistry still burned between us, still boiled like the world might catch fire around us at any second.

But now, the history that had plagued us seemed to have fallen away, and we could just be together. Just the two of us. No worrying about job offers or what was going to happen next. No, all I cared about was kissing her, showing her in all the ways I could how much I longed for her.

I wrapped my arms around her and deepened the kiss, pulling her in close to me so there wasn't a shred of space between us. I couldn't get near enough to her, not even if I tried, and I would give it everything I had. She smiled against my mouth, and I knew she could tell what was going on inside my head because it was going through hers too.

"I want you to take me to bed," she whispered against my lips, her words so soft because she was so sure I would listen to every little thing that came out of her mouth.

I didn't want to miss a thing, not a single thing. I wanted to drink in every second we had together no matter what it took.

And right now, as she kissed me again, I knew I would spend all day in bed with her if she let me.

CHAPTER 72



MORGAN

We tumbled into bed together, his hands pushing into my hair as he smiled into the long kiss neither of us seemed to be able to break away from. His words were ringing in my ears, the sweetness of them playing over and over again in my head. *I love you, I love you, I love you.*

How could anything matter more than the way he felt about me? I couldn't believe he'd said it, but at the same time, the words felt utterly natural. And now we were kissing, his body moving against mine, his lips parted as he pushed his tongue deep into my mouth to taste me.

These lips that told me he loved me, these lips that I was addicted to in every way I could be. I panted against his mouth as I reached down to his jeans, sliding my hands over the slightly rough fabric. I wanted to take in the texture of him, every part of him in every way I could, to commit him to memory. As if I ever could have forgotten him, after all we had been through, after all we had shared together.

He kissed me slowly, deeply, taking his time before he began to strip me down. It felt like the first time all over again.

He moved his hands down to my waist, pushing up my shirt. I felt his breath hitch slightly in his throat as he brushed his fingers over my stomach, and the tingles flooded down between my legs and across my thighs. I wanted him inside me, but more than anything, I wanted him to feel me, touch me, in all the ways he wanted to.

He eased my shirt over my head and leaned down to kiss along the top of my jeans, making my toes curl with a delicious anticipation. I looked down, watching him as he teased me. He knew just what I wanted, just how much I craved it.

He slowly inched my jeans and panties down my body, pulling them off, kissing each inch of flesh as he exposed it. His lips brushed against my thighs, the very inside, making my whole body tremble and tingle as he went. I could feel the wetness building between my legs, aching for the feel of his mouth against me down there, my heart beginning to pound in my chest as I waited for him to give me what I wanted.

Slowly, he worked his way back up my leg, not taking his eyes off me until he landed between my thighs. Spreading them apart with his hands, he let out a long groan as he saw how wet I was for him already.

He planted his mouth against me, and my back arched up from the bed. I pressed my lips together and focused on the sheer shock of how good he felt, how sweet his warm mouth was against my pussy. He swirled his tongue around me until I could feel my toes curling in an almost unbearable pleasure, and then he drew me between his lips and began to suck lightly, sending sensation down the insides of my thighs. I reached down, pushing my fingers through his hair, massaging his scalp as he went down on me like his life depended on it.

I could feel the orgasm growing fast, and I knew it wouldn't be long until I reached the release I was craving so badly. It felt like every part of me was tingling on the very edge of that pleasure, the insides of my thighs twitching, my muscles tensing as his mouth pushed me closer and closer to the edge.

“Oh, fuck,” I gasped, and I pushed myself into him as I felt the orgasm hit me at last. I squeezed my thighs around him, and he didn't move his mouth for an instant, teasing out this delicious, almost painfully pleasurable orgasm as it took me over. My hands were grasped tightly to his head, as though he would have gone anywhere—as though he would have wanted to when this felt as perfect as it did.

Once the pleasure had begun to ebb away once more, he lifted his head and grinned up at me. His lips were smeared with my wetness, and the sight of him like that, between my thighs, sent another shiver of pleasure through me. He got up from the bed and stepped back to get rid of his clothes and I admired this gorgeous man before me.

I reached out and pulled him on top of me, wrapping my legs around him. The need to be even closer was almost overwhelming. I wanted to make sure there was no distance between us at all, almost so we were just one being, lost to this sweet, sexy, intimate moment, where we cared only for each other, only for how much we could get and how much more we could take.

He pushed into me in one slow motion, and both of us moaned in pleasure at the same time. I could feel his breath on my skin, and I pulled him in for another kiss, our lips coming together and our tongues touching once more. He wrapped his arms around me and held me tight, held me like he never wanted to let go of me. I knew how he felt. In this moment, I could have stayed here forever. It wasn't just the pleasure, though that was a part of it. No, it was the feeling of being close to him, not having to keep any more secrets from him any longer. I craved that more than I had ever known I did, craved the raw desire and the feel of being needed by him the same way I needed him.

He took me slowly, taking his time, clearly in no rush for this to end. He looked deep into my eyes, not moving his gaze from mine as though he was drinking in every moment of the two of us together. I cupped his face in my hands, holding him there, making sure I didn't miss a second of this. I brushed my thumb over his lips, feeling the slickness of his mouth under my finger, and I pulled him down for another kiss.

I wasn't sure how long the two of us were there, wrapped up in each other, holding each other like that. Time seemed to spin out of control around us, like we didn't have a say over where it went or what form it took now. We were just lost to each other, lost to the passion we shared together. I wouldn't have changed a thing. The warmth of the pleasure began to build up inside of me, and slowly, slowly, I felt the second orgasm starting to brew deep in my belly.

I squeezed my thighs around him, rocking back against him, pulling him deeper and deeper into me. I couldn't get enough. His breath was coming faster, harder now, and he pressed his face into my neck, breathing in my scent, kissing my throat and letting his teeth graze just lightly against me. I shivered, groaned, pushed closer to him, so I could feel the pounding of his heart against me, a sure sign he was enjoying this as much as I was. It was more than just sex. We were making love, the first time we had been together this way since he had confessed his feelings for me, and it felt like nothing else we had shared before.

As though this was a new start. As though this was how it was always going to be, from this moment on.

I could feel his body starting to tense, and the sight of him so consumed with pleasure was enough to push me over the edge. He slid himself up to the hilt inside me, and I moaned again as I felt the second orgasm flood my lower

body, tingling all the way from my toes up to my pussy and back down again. It was warmer, deeper than the first one, throbbing deep down inside of me until my chest felt like it was going to burst.

And then, a few seconds later, I felt him reach his own release inside me. He moved in deep, one last time, and held himself there as I came around him, letting out a deep growl of pleasure as he finished inside me. I hooked my ankles behind his back, pulling him in deep, deeper, not wanting to let him go, not wanting this to be over quite yet, not if I could avoid it.

Finally, though, he eased out of me, kneeling between my legs and wrapping his arms around me as he pulled me in close once more. He kissed the top of my head, and I nestled into his chest before the two of us toppled down onto the bed, still tangled up, like we were never going to let each other go.

I closed my eyes and rested my head against him, listening to his heart as he began to breathe normally again. I loved these moments when we didn't have to say anything. Whatever we wanted to share, we already had. We already knew it.

Lying there in bed with him felt like heaven. I knew there were still choices I had to make, things I had to do, but right now, it didn't seem like they mattered at all. I could get to that when I needed to. For now, it was just us, in the soft, comfortable quiet, the afterglow of lovemaking that had my whole body filled to the brim with pleasure I didn't even think was possible.

"Mmm," I murmured as I reached up to trail my fingers over his chest, running them through the hair there. He was so strong, so masculine, and I could have stayed there all day, in the comfort of his arms.

He looked down at me and smiled, pushing a strand of hair out of my face.

"You really meant it?" I asked him before I could stop myself.

"Really meant what?"

"When you said you loved me," I told him. "You meant it?"

He stared down at me for a moment, as though surprised. I wasn't sure what had come over me. Maybe I just wanted to hear him say it again, hear those words come out of his mouth so I could be sure he had been telling the truth when he said it to me. I loved hearing him say it to me, almost like I was addicted, and I didn't want to miss out on the chance to listen to them again, like a song stuck in my head on repeat.

"Of course I love you, Morgan," he murmured to me, smiling. "I've loved

you all this time. Even when we were apart, I loved you. I could never even think of being with someone else, not the way I was with you. I loved you then, and I love you now, and I'm going to love you no matter what comes next. Okay?"

I grinned and buried my face in his chest, inhaling the scent of him again. God, I loved this man. More than I could put into words in any sensible way. But the closest I could come was to whisper that precious phrase back to him, make sure he knew I felt it, too.

"I love you too, Jax," I whispered to him. I would have stayed here all day if I could, all night. The comfort of his arms wrapped so tight around me seemed to make everything else just fall away, and I could have let that sweet comfort wash around me for a week straight.

Afterward, maybe. After I had made the decision, I could get to that part. But for now? For now, I could just drink up every little piece of it that I could, and hope that I came to the right answer in the morning.

CHAPTER 73



JAX

I felt a twinge in my chest as I walked into the office, and I did my best to push it down. I knew the guys were going to have some serious questions about what had been going on here, if Morgan had made her decision yet, but I got the feeling I was going to have to let them down.

I hated having to go back on what I had been so sure of. I had imagined that Morgan would accept the offer I had for her the moment I laid it all out, but the more I thought about it, the more obvious it seemed that she was going to take her chances with the company she had stuck with all along. It was probably the right decision for her, even if it wasn't the one I would have made if I had the chance. She deserved to reap the rewards of all the time and effort she had put in there, and I hoped she got a chance to enjoy them when she accepted the partnership with her boss.

But it meant I was going to have to let the guys know she wasn't going to go through with this, even after I had twisted their arms to give her this chance in the first place, and that? Yeah, that sucked. I was probably going to get some jibes about it, and hell, could I even argue with that? I had told them she was perfect for the company and then had to step back and accept I wasn't the one who made that call, she was.

I had asked the guys to meet me in the conference room so I could catch them all up on this. I wanted to clear the air with as many of them as I could without having to go over it all again, and this seemed the most straightforward way to do it. I made my way up there and paused outside the door, my hand on the knob, before I stepped inside.

But then I thought back to the two of us the night before, all wrapped up in one another, her arms around me as she looked at me with the warmth in

her eyes I craved like nothing else in the world. I'd earned that because she knew she could trust me to do what was right for her, for us, and I wasn't going to back down on it now. I wanted her to look at me that way all the time, and if admitting this mistake was a way to make it happen, hey, it didn't seem like much of an ask.

I pushed the door open, and all the guys were waiting there for me on the other side.

"There he is!" Max exclaimed. "I was starting to think you just got us here to waste our time."

"No, you're all good," I promised him, and I took a seat at the head of the table. "Thank you all for meeting with me today."

"What's this about?" Seb piped up, lifting his coffee to his lips as he raised his eyebrows expectantly. "You better have a good reason for getting us to meet here so early in the morning."

"Yeah, has Morgan made a decision yet?" Derrick asked with interest. He had been the biggest supporter of getting her into this place, so no wonder he wanted to find out what was happening with her now.

I sighed, clasped my hands in front of me, and began. "I think she has. And I'm pretty sure she's going to go with another position."

"Shit, really?" Max exclaimed, and I could tell he wasn't happy—more on my behalf than his, but still.

"Yeah, we talked it over. She didn't tell me for sure one way or another, but that seemed to be the way it was going," I explained, my shoulders sagging heavily like the weight of the world was on them. I wanted to find some way to turn this around, to make like I actually had some control over this, but it wasn't about the control I did or didn't have. It was about letting go of that and allowing her to call the shots on her own life. No matter what I might have thought was best for her, she knew better than me, and I wanted her to feel my support in whatever decision she made.

"But I wanted to thank all of you, anyway, for accepting my suggestion," I continued. "Being willing to listen to me, to consider her for this position—I know it's tough for you guys to let anyone else in after how hard you've all worked to get here. Trust me, I do. But knowing that you're willing to hear me out and give her a chance? It means a lot to me."

They nodded, and I could tell they got where I was coming from. I didn't want this to be an issue between us, not now, not ever, but they weren't going to make me feel like it was. I appreciated it.

I finished up the meeting soon afterward, and Derrick invited me out to join him for lunch. I accepted at once, glad to have someone to talk to about this, especially since he had been such a major supporter in getting the other guys to even consider this.

“You really think she’s going to go with another position?” he asked me, and I sighed and nodded.

“I think so,” I replied. “She wants something she’s worked for herself, and she feels like this is just being handed to her.”

“I can get that,” Derrick agreed. “I think I’d be the same way.”

“Yeah, me too, probably,” I replied.

He eyed me for a moment before he continued. “You’re taking this better than I thought you would.”

“What, you thought I would freak out about it or something?” I laughed.

He shrugged. “I know you’re used to getting things your way,” he replied. “Must be difficult to give that up.”

“For her, it doesn’t feel difficult,” I replied, shrugging. “If it’s what she wants, I’m not going to try and fight her on it. I just want her to be happy. That’s the only thing that matters to me. If this is what she needs to get there, I can live with that.”

Derrick grinned. “You’re really in love with her, huh?”

“I really am,” I replied, smiling as I thought back to the look on her face when I said those words for the first time the day before.

I wanted to capture that moment in amber and relive it over and over again, I loved it so much. Hearing her say it back to me had felt downright sacred, something I never thought I would get a chance to hear again.

But we had earned it. Both of us had worked to get to a point where we could be together happily, and nothing was going to change that. It was just that simple, as far as I was concerned.

Derrick and I finished up lunch, and I headed back to the office to return to work. I wanted to give her a call, see if she had made up her mind yet, but there was no way I would put that kind of pressure on her. She didn’t want to be rushed, and the last thing I needed was to make her feel like I was trying to nudge her in one direction or another. I was pretty certain she would have already made up her mind by now as it was, and she didn’t need me trying to push her toward whatever I thought was best. We had already talked that over, and I knew the last thing she needed was to feel like I wanted something from her she might not have been willing to give.

I was proud of her, though, I really was. Proud of her for being able to stand up for what she wanted, for not letting me control where her life was going to go next. It was the last thing she'd wanted, for someone else to decide how this was going to unfold for her, and she was right to fight for what she really needed. I hoped she would be happy with whatever choice she made. And hey, if she turned around and decided she would have been better off working with us after all, I was pretty sure I would be able to convince the guys to give her another shot.

That was something for the future. Right now, the most important thing was hearing her out and making her feel supported no matter what she decided to do, and I intended to ensure that happened. I was her partner now, her partner in life, not in work, and that meant I stood by her no matter what choices she made. I knew she was going to kill it at whichever company she decided to go for next. She was amazing at what she did, and whoever got her, they were going to be lucky to have her.

I just wished it could have been us.

I brushed off that thought and tried my best to keep my focus on work, not wanting to allow the hopes I had to get in the way of what needed to be done today. It wouldn't exactly convince the guys they had been right to listen to my suggestions if I managed to spend today distracted by the thought of her.

I focused on putting together the final report for the work I had done at KICKS, and I couldn't help but feel a swell of pride as I got to it. I had really done something special there. When I worked with her, it was as though I was capable of things I never would have been able to imagine if she hadn't been in my life, and I was so grateful for that—and so excited to see what might come next, too. With her by my side, even if it wasn't in a professional setting, I knew I could take on the world.

Suddenly, there was a knock at my door, and I glanced up. Derrick was standing there, his face practically beaming with excitement.

"What's up?" I asked, closing my laptop and frowning.

He jerked his head back down the corridor. "I think you should come with me," he told me.

"What for? Is everything okay?"

"More than okay," he promised. "Come on. This way."

I shook my head, confused, but got to my feet to go after him anyway. I rarely saw Derrick this excited about anything, so I couldn't help but find

myself intrigued about what might have put him in that mood. No harm in finding out.

As I followed him down to the conference room, I felt a flicker of hope in the back of my mind. Could it be her? I had accepted the idea that she wasn't interested in my job offer, but that didn't mean I didn't want her to make the choice I thought would be best for her. I wasn't going to get my hopes up, but it was hard to hold it in, the questions rushing around my mind.

And when I paused outside the door, it was almost as though I knew what was going to be waiting there when I turned the corner. *Who* was going to be waiting there.

And, sure enough, when I stepped inside, there she was. Morgan. Grinning up at me as she sat at the table, like she had the biggest secret she couldn't wait to share.

Though I was pretty sure I had already guessed what it was.

CHAPTER 74



MORGAN

I beamed up at him as he came to sit down at the table next to me, his eyes bright with excitement. He must have known what I was doing here, must have known I had arrived to accept the job that he had offered me, and I couldn't wait to get started.

This was going to be amazing. I just knew it. It might not have been what I expected, but the more I had thought about it, the more obvious it had become this was the best choice for me. Yes, I wanted to make the decision on my own terms, but that decision had to lead me toward the best next step in my career. And this job offer was obviously just that. A chance for me to take a huge step up in the world, a step up I could never have imagined possible, and a chance to share my work with the man who made me happier than anything else.

It was a no-brainer.

So, I was at the office, ready to tell him that I had made my choice—and my choice was to work with him. He hadn't put any pressure on me to decide, and knowing he had accepted my decision no matter which option I pursued, it was a huge relief. Having his support meant the damn world to me, and I hoped he knew it. Hoped he knew that it had empowered me to make the choice I was making now, even if it wasn't what I thought I'd wanted at first.

"Morgan, what are you doing here?" he murmured, reaching out to take my hand.

Even though one of the other partners—Derrick? That was his name, I was pretty sure, and I was going to have to learn them all now that I would be working here—was right there, he wasn't worried about showing me physical

affection.

I was so grateful for that. We didn't have to hide it from anyone anymore. We could just touch each other with this easy, casual warmth that made me even more certain my decision had been the right one.

"I'm here because I want to accept your offer," I told him, and he paused for a moment, savoring the words as they came out of my mouth. I knew they were what he'd wanted to hear, and I was so glad I could gift them to him, so glad I could tell him what he'd been hoping for all this time.

"You are," he breathed. "You have no idea how long I've been waiting to hear you say that."

I laughed and gave his hand a squeeze. I wanted him to know how much I appreciated his patience and his support. I knew I wouldn't have been able to accept this offer if it hadn't been for him telling me he would have been there for me no matter what choice I made. It had lifted the pressure off of my shoulders and allowed me to see clearly, to see that taking this job was the choice that made the most sense for me, and I was so happy he had allowed me to get to this point on my own.

"Yeah, well, I've been thinking it over," I explained to him. "And this just made the most sense to me. I know this is an amazing chance for me to take my career to the next level, and if it means I get to work alongside you, too, it's even better."

He nodded and smiled so wide he looked like he could barely fit it on his face anymore.

"I saw the work the two of you did for KICKS when you were working together," Derrick said. "You really know how to pull off some impressive stuff. I'm looking forward to seeing what you'll put together here."

"Me too," I replied.

"We need to get some champagne," Jax told me, and he glanced around at Derrick. "We keep some in the office, right?"

"I can go get some," he offered.

I laughed. "You really think that's a good idea?" I asked him. "Drinking on the job when I've only just got here?"

"Oh, you really have no idea how we do things here, huh?" he teased me right back.

"Okay, I think I'm really going to like it here." I giggled, tucking a loose strand of hair back behind my ear. I felt like I was almost giddy, as though my feet weren't entirely touching the ground, but at the same time, as though

I had never been more down to earth or sure of myself in my life.

When I looked at Jax, I knew my future lay with him, and I wouldn't have wanted to change it for the world, not for anything. He was my man, in all the ways it mattered, and I loved being his woman.

It didn't take long for the news to spread around this small office, and the rest of the guys came in to join us once Derrick had returned with the champagne. I was so glad they all seemed as excited as I was to dive right into this. I had been a little worried they had just offered me the job because Jax had pushed for it, but it was clear they were looking forward to working with me, too. I wasn't sure what it was going to look like, working with all of them, but I couldn't wait to find out.

We didn't have anything other than just plastic cups to drink out of, but it didn't bother me. I just wanted to enjoy this celebration while I could, this feeling of relief and comfort in knowing that I had made the right choice and could finally just focus on what was to come, instead of constantly weighing up the pros and cons inside my head. Jax held my hand under the table, squeezing tight like he never wanted to let me go, and I knew how he felt. I wanted nothing more than to just be here with him, sharing the champagne, while the guys chatted around us about how it was going to be having me working with them.

"We've never had many women working in the office," Sebastian said, and I smiled.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to turn into mother hen," I promised him. "I know you guys have fun around here. Trust me, I'm not going to try and stop you."

"I like her already, Jax," he said, and a laugh spread around the room.

Maybe it was the champagne, or maybe it was something else, but I could feel the weight lifting from my shoulders. Yeah, I knew this had been the right call for me, even if it had taken me a minute to figure it out. I was just glad I had ended up where I needed to be, even if the path had been a little winding to get here.

Susan had taken my resignation well, especially when I had told her what I was moving on to next. She encouraged me to go after it, the look on her face telling me everything I needed to know.

"You can't say no to something like that," she said, shaking her head. "And you deserve it, Morgan."

"Thank you," I told her, feeling a little choked up as I thought about

leaving this place. But I had to trust that me getting out of here would open the door for someone else to step in and take my job, for someone else to get their foot in on the ladder. I would have to check back in down the line to see how it had gone, who had taken my spot, and just how they were doing. Maybe show them just what was waiting for them if they stuck it out there, too.

We drank the champagne, and Max headed out to get us another bottle once we were running low. I grinned and shifted a little closer to Jax. I knew I probably should have been acting with a little more professional decorum now that we were working together, but he was still my man, and I still had a hard time keeping my hands off of him. I was sure the novelty of working with him would wear off eventually—or maybe I would always feel this way, feel this draw to him, as though he was the most important person in the room. I hoped so.

“Hey, you two, no fraternizing at work,” Derrick joked, as he noticed us getting a little cozy with each other.

“Yeah, good luck enforcing that rule.” Jax laughed right back, draping an arm around the back of my chair. I wasn’t going to make a point of trying to flirt with him in front of the guys, but, as the tipsiness from the champagne started to settle in, I knew I wasn’t going to be able to pretend I didn’t feel that draw to him. The excitement of me accepting the position wasn’t something I could just brush off, and I couldn’t wait to celebrate with him as soon as we got back to my place.

If we made it that long, of course.

By the time Max had returned with the second bottle of champagne, the guys were starting to talk about going down to a bar nearby.

“You’ll love it there,” Jax told me. “We go there whenever we have something to celebrate.”

“Yeah, and we’ve got something to drink about today!” Seb exclaimed.

I giggled. I loved how excited they all were about me being here with them, as though they couldn’t wait to see where this was going to take us. I felt the exact same way, and their enthusiasm was contagious. I couldn’t wait to see how I fit in.

As they cracked into the next bottle, Jax led me down to the office that was going to be my new professional home for the foreseeable future—and he pushed the door shut behind us, hitting me with that sexy-ass smile he knew made it difficult for me to resist him.

“You want to christen your new office?” he asked, taking a step toward me and sliding his hands to my waist.

I looked up at him, biting my lip. “I thought they said no fraternizing at the office,” I reminded him.

He shrugged. “Oh, I think we can get away with it today,” he replied. “Special dispensation.”

He lowered his mouth down to mine, and, as soon as our lips touched, I melted into him. No tension, no stress, no nothing—nothing but how much I wanted him, how much I loved him, and how much I needed him.

I reached behind me to make sure the door was locked and then wrapped my arms around him and pulled him in close. He was right. We could break the rules a little, couldn't we?

EPILOGUE



MORGAN

I chewed my lip as I fired off the last of my emails. That should be it for today.

It was late, dark outside with the slow patter of rain against my window. The rest of the office was quiet, apart from a couple of the cleaners, and I was sure I was the last one left in here now. I was usually the last one out, but it never bothered me. I was the newest partner, after all, and I wanted to make sure I showed them exactly why they had taken me on, why they had decided to let me break the rules and join their company after so long with just the six of them.

I was dealing with our latest project, managing a launch campaign for a new phone. We were a couple of days out from the actual launch date, and we had all been working hard to make sure everything came together the way it was supposed to.

But it looked like we had actually pulled it off, as crazy as that was to believe. I loved knowing that we had nearly finished, especially after we had worked so hard to get where we were. The satisfaction of seeing a project come together was unmatched, and I loved feeling like I had been a major part of that. Knowing that we would be seeing the ads we had envisioned on billboards around the city soon enough, it was enough to convince me that this job had been right for me all along.

I had been with the company a few months now, and damn, it had been full on, but in the best way possible. I was amazed at how well I fit into the partnership position, especially since it was such a step up from what I had been doing before.

Working with the guys, it wasn't difficult to find my place, given how

friendly they all were. It was more like hanging out with a group of friends than it was working, at times, and that atmosphere made it easy to bounce around ideas without feeling like you had to hold back so as not to offend anyone.

And I knew they appreciated how hard I had been working. I loved my job, so it never felt difficult for me, especially with my home life being as blissful as it had been lately.

Speaking of, I glanced at the clock and gasped when I spotted the time. It was nearly nine. I had told Jax I was going to be home by six. Shit.

I grabbed my phone and dialed his number. He answered after a couple of rings.

“I’m so sorry,” I blurted out. “I got caught up with work.”

“Yeah, I figured.” He laughed. He didn’t sound mad at all. I guessed when we were working for the same company, it didn’t feel like much of an imposition for me to work late. Every hour I put in at the office was benefitting him, too, and that made it a lot easier to take.

“I’m leaving now,” I promised him. “I’ll be home soon, okay?”

“No problem,” he replied. “I’ll get dinner back in the oven.”

“Thanks,” I replied. “Love you, see you soon.”

“Love you too,” he replied, and he hung up the phone.

I paused for a moment. Was it just me, or was there something different to his tone right now? I was sure it was just me overthinking, but still. Anyway, I needed to get out of here and get back to our place.

When my lease had run out, Jax had offered for me to come live with him. I had thought about it for a long time, worrying it was too soon, that it would be too much pressure given we worked together as well, but eventually, I agreed.

And ever since, I had known I had made the right choice. Living with him had been downright perfect, and I wouldn’t have changed a thing about it. The sweetness of his company, waking up next to him every morning, it was unlike anything I’d experienced before. Living closer to the office helped, too, but more than that, the comfortable routine we’d fallen into made it easy to get up every morning.

He would wake up early and head down to the gym. By the time he got back to our apartment, he would be ready for a shower, and the two of us would take one together. And, yeah, occasionally we got up to other stuff in there too, not that I was complaining. His touch woke me up better than any

morning coffee could have, a hit of energy that I loved more than anything.

We alternated who made breakfast and who packed our lunches every morning, and shared a companionable half hour of food preparation together in the kitchen. I couldn't cope with another sushi plate at my desk, and he suggested we start bringing in lunches we made for each other. I wasn't much of a cook, but I had managed to figure out exactly how to make him a meal he would look forward to eating, and it was easier for me to take the time to perfect his food than it was mine. When you loved someone that much, it always felt that way, simpler to care for them than for yourself.

And then we'd head in to work together and take care of what needed to be done for the day. We had done a pretty good job of keeping it professional in the office, even if we had snuck in a few afternoon quickies when things were quiet. One of the upsides of working with your boyfriend was knowing you could blow off some serious steam whenever you needed to, right?

Coming home every day, I loved stepping through the door and breathing in the scent of it, of our home together. I could never have imagined this was where we would end up when I had run into him again at that conference, but now? Now, it just felt right to be here with him. To be building this life together, a life I really wanted. I had been so convinced I couldn't have everything I wanted, couldn't balance my work and my personal life, but he had found a way to make it easy for me, and the match of the two felt downright perfect.

I drove back over to our apartment, the windshield wipers beating against the window to brush away the rain. I liked these evenings when the rain and cold settled in around me. It felt like we were in a cozy little space, made for just the two of us, where nobody else could even get close. I loved that. Any time we could spend together without the rest of the world edging in on us was time I savored, especially with how hard we had been working recently.

I arrived outside our place and looked up to the window to see the warm glow of light coming from inside, a sure sign he was there waiting for me. I smiled and locked up the car before I headed for the stairs, shaking off the last of the rain that had clung to my coat.

I unlocked the door, and as I stepped inside, I couldn't help but notice how dark it was in there. Not totally dark, though. Candles flickered along the hallway, the soft glow filling the space with a golden light. As I slipped off my shoes, I noticed something on the floor. Leaning down to get a better look, I realized they were rose petals. I picked one up, rubbed the velvety

smoothness between my fingertips, and raised my eyebrows. What was going on here?

I followed the rose petals along the hallway, and they reached the bedroom, where the door was pulled shut. I felt a shiver of excitement in my chest before I pushed it open. I wasn't sure exactly what was waiting for me on the other side, but I had an idea, and if it was what I thought it was...

No point waiting any longer. I planted a hand on the door and pushed it open. And sure enough, there he was, Jax, waiting on the other side, a smile spread wide over his face, and candles scattered around the room, rose petals covering the floor and the bed.

And, in his hand, a small box. My breath caught in my throat. Oh my God.

"Hey, Morgan," he murmured. "You kept me waiting long enough."

"What is this, Jax?" I asked him.

"I think you know," he replied, and he sank to one knee in front of me, popping open the box. My hand flew to my mouth.

"Oh my God," I gasped as I felt the swell of emotion rise up to get the better of me.

"I've had this ring for a long time," he explained to me. "Since we were first together. I got it because even back then, I knew I wanted to be with you. I knew you were the person I wanted to be with more than anything in the world. Nobody else could come close. And even when we parted ways, I kept hold of it because some part of me felt like we would find our way back to each other."

I gazed down at the ring as he spoke, the enormity of his story filling my heart with emotion. I couldn't believe it. He had really held on to this ring for all that time? Waiting for me? Waiting for me to come back to him? I could hardly believe it. For someone to have loved me that much, for so long, for all these years, without me even knowing it? For him to have waited for me to come back to him and to have known I one day would? It was more than I ever could have asked for.

I loved him. God, I loved him, and I was so glad I could finally accept just how much I loved him.

That I wanted to spend the rest of my life with him. There was no doubt in my mind.

"And when we did, I held on to this ring even tighter because I thought I would finally get a chance to give it to you," he explained. I could hear his

voice getting choked with emotion, but he pushed it down for a moment so he could continue.

“And now... now, I finally get to ask you the question that I’ve wanted to ask you for the last ten years,” he told me. “Morgan, will you marry me?”

I let the words hang there, letting them fill me with warmth. I already knew my answer, but I loved hearing him ask it, loved knowing he felt the same way that I did, loved hearing those perfect words come out of his mouth.

And then I grinned at him.

“Of course I will!”

He rose to his feet and took my hand gently in his, slipping the ring down over my finger. I held out my hand, staring at it—this piece that had so much history to it, so much of his hope and belief that we would end up with each other tied up right there inside it.

“Sorry I kept you waiting so long,” I whispered, not sure if I meant tonight, or in our lives in general. He cupped my face in his hands and planted a kiss on my lips.

“All that matters is that you’re here now,” he murmured, brushing his nose lightly against mine and smiling. I sank into his arms happily, pressing my head into his shoulder. I loved him. I loved him more than I even thought was possible, more than I had ever imagined I could, and he had waited for me all this time, until I was ready to hear him say what he’d just said to me.

I was going to spend the rest of my life with him. Every day, waking up next to him, going to work with him, the two of us taking on the world together. Just like it was always meant to be, just like it should have been from the start. I hoped he knew how damn happy I was, how much I wanted to keep this feeling alive.

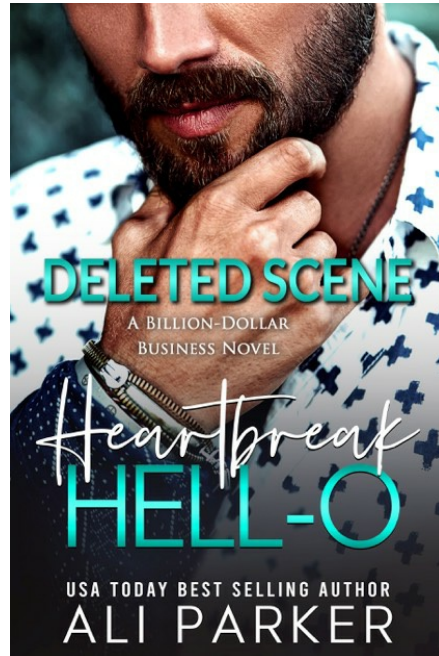
“I love you,” I whispered to him.

He grinned and gazed into my eyes. “I love you too,” he replied, and he kissed me again. As he pulled me in close, I knew we had a hell of a lot of celebrating to do before this night was over.

The first night of the rest of our lives. And we were going to make it a damn good one.

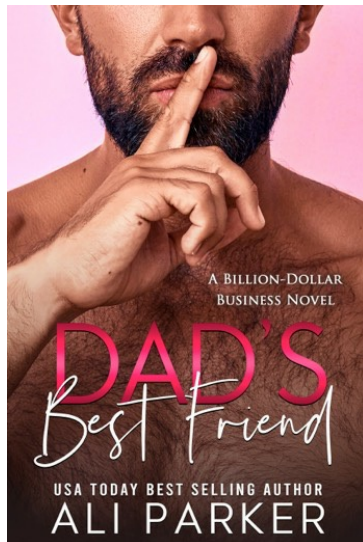
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There are two rules I live by.

Don't touch what isn't yours, and don't lie.

Simple enough.

Until she walks into my life at her father's request.

He asked me to give her a job, not put my hands all over her.

But that's all I want to do.

She has a body made for mine.

I want to make her sweat.

But she isn't mine, and I shouldn't touch.

Especially considering the age difference—

And the fact that she's my best friend's daughter.

She's made a liar out of me.

Breaking my own rules has never tasted so sweet.

We'll face the consequences later.

Together.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Ali Parker is a full-time contemporary and new adult romance writer with more than a hundred and twenty books behind her. She loves coffee, watching a great movie and hanging out with her hubs. By hanging out, she means making out. The man is hot. Hello.

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Heartbreak HELL-O

A Billion-Dollar Business Novel 3

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